

A BANKRUPT HEART

By
FLORENCE MARRYAT



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A BANKRUPT HEART.

VOL. II.

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A BANKRUPT HEART.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF

‘LOVE’S CONFLICT,’ ‘MY OWN CHILD,’ ‘PARSON JONES,’
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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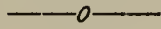
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CHAPTER I.

FOR seven weeks Nell Llewellyn fluctuated between life and death before she was fully roused again to a sense of living and its cares and responsibilities. It was on a sunny afternoon, in the middle of October, that she first awoke to the consciousness that she was herself. But she was too weak to do more than be aware of it. The afternoon sun was glinting through the white blind of her bedroom window, and a little breeze caused it to flap gently against the latticed panes. Nell lay on her bed, as weak and unreasoning and incurious as a little child, and watched the tassel of the

blind bobbing up and down, without questioning why she lay there, unable to move or think. An old woman named Betsy Hobbs, who came in sometimes to help in an emergency at the farmhouse, was seated by the window, with a large pair of knitting-needles in her hands, a ball of worsted at her feet, and her head sunk on her breast, enjoying a snooze after the labours of the day. Nell stared at her unfamiliar figure with the same sense of incapacity to understand her presence, and the same sense of utter indifference to not understanding it. Her feeble sight roved over everything in the room with the same apathy. The coverlet on her bed was a coloured one, and she kept on counting the squares and wondering in a vague manner why one should be red and the next blue. One red, and the next blue—one red, and the next blue—she kept on mentally repeating to herself, until her eyes had travelled to the foot of the bed, over the footboard of which was thrown a pink knitted shawl, or kerchief, which her mother had bought

for her just before she was taken ill, and which she had worn around her shoulders on the evening she had gone to hear Hugh Owen preach in the field. That little link between the past and the present recalled it all. In a moment she comprehended. She was no longer happy, innocent Nell Llewellyn, spending her young life at Pantycuckoo Farm, but the disgraced and degraded daughter of the house, who had crept home, a living lie, to hide her shame and sorrow in her mother's bosom. The remembrance brought with it but one desire—one want—which expressed itself in a feeble cry of 'Mother!' At least, it was what Nell intended for a cry; but her voice was so faint and weak, that Betsy Hobbs only roused from her nap with a feeling of curiosity if she *had* heard anything. She was accustomed to nursing the sick, however, and was a light sleeper, so she hobbled up to the bedside and peered into her patient's face. Sure enough her eyes were open and there was reason in them.

‘Praise the Lord, dearie,’ she ejaculated, ‘you’re yourself agin at last!’

But Nell turned her face to the wall with the same cry of ‘Mother!’

‘To be sure, dearie; and I’ll fetch ’er in ’alf a minnit. She’s only stepped down to the dairy to see ’ow things are goin’ on, for business ’as been sadly neglected of late. Night and day—night and day—the pore dear’s bin by your side, longin’ to ’ear your own voice agin, and she’ll be over-j’yed to find you in your senses. Come, drink a drop o’ milk, do, and then I’ll fetch ’er.’

But Nell turned fractiously from the proffered cup and reiterated her cry for her mother. She was gaunt and emaciated to a degree. The cruel fever had wasted her rounded limbs, and dug deep furrows beneath her eyes, and turned her delicate complexion to yellow and brown. She looked like a woman of forty or fifty, instead of a girl of three-and-twenty. As the old woman ambled out of the room, Nell raised her thin hands and gazed

at the white nails and bony knuckles with amazement. Where had she been? What had happened to her, to alter her like that? Her questions were answered by the entrance of Mrs Llewellyn.

‘Oh, my dear lass—my own poor lamb!’ she exclaimed, as she came hurriedly to the bedside, and folded her daughter in her arms. ‘Praise the Lord that you have taken a turn at last! I’ve been watching for this days and days, till I began to fear it might never be. You’ve been main ill, my girl, and all the house nursing you through it. Father’s lying down on his bed. He hasn’t had his coat off for three nights. But you’re better, my lass, you’re better, thank God for that!’

‘How long have I been ill?’ asked Nell in a faint voice.

‘Better than six weeks—going on for seven,’ replied her mother; ‘and it’s been an anxious time for all of us. I thought poor Hetty would have cried herself sick last week, when Dr Cowell told us we mustn’t build our hopes too much on keep-

ing you here. I think he will be as surprised as anyone when he hears the good news. Oh, my lass, it would have been a sore day for more than one of us if we had lost you !’

‘I may go yet, mother,’ said Nell, looking at her skeleton hands ; ‘there’s not much of me left, I’m thinking.’

‘Oh, no you won’t, my dear, not this time, thank God. I know what these fevers are. I’ve seen too many of them. When they’ve burnt themselves out, they’re over. And you’re as cool as a cucumber now. You feel terrible weak, I know, but good feeding and care will soon set you up again.’

‘What a trouble I must have been to you,’ sighed Nell wearily ; ‘and so unworthy of it too. Mother, why didn’t you let me die, and make an end of it? Life is not worth living at any time, and I’ve seen the best of mine.’

‘Nonsense, my girl, you talk like that because you’re so weak, that’s all. You’ll feel quite different in another day or so.

Here, just let me give you a few spoonfuls of this beef-tea. I made it myself, so I won't take a refusal. There's a good maid, and now you must shut your eyes and go to sleep again.'

'Don't leave me,' murmured Nell, as she lay with her hand clasped in her mother's. 'Talk to me, mother. Tell me you are really glad that I am better, and I will try to live for your sake.'

'Glad, child! Why, what are you thinking of? Glad to get my own lass back from the grave, as you may say? I should be a nice mother if I weren't. Don't you know by this time that you've been my hope and pride ever since you was born? Why, I've been praying night and day to the Lord to spare you for weeks past. Ay, and not only me; all Usk has been asking the same thing, and there's been one in particular as has wearied Heaven with prayers for your recovery, if ever man did.'

'*One in particular?*' echoed the sick girl faintly curious. 'Who was that, mother?'

'Why, that young saint on earth, Hugh

Owen, to be sure. I never saw a man so unhappy as he's been about you. He looks ten years older since you were taken ill. Do you know, Nell, that he's been here every minute he could spare from his work, kneeling by your bedside whilst you were raving in delirium, praying with all his heart and soul, that God would spare your precious life to us a little longer. Hugh Owen has been your tenderest nurse. I've seen him sit here, without saying a word for hours together, only holding you in his arms when you got a bit violent, and coaxing you by every means in his power to take a drop of wine or a spoonful of jelly. I do believe that you owe your life in a great measure to Hugh's care (and so I've told father that if you lived, it would be), for though we all tried our best, no one has had so much influence over you as him, or been able to make you take nourishment like he could.'

'Did he hear me talk?' asked Nell, fearfully.

'Hear you talk, child? Well, pretty nearly

all Usk heard you talk, you used to scream so loud sometimes. But it was all nonsense. No one could understand it, so you needn't be afraid you told any of your little secrets. I couldn't make head nor tail of what you said, nor Hugh either. But his presence seemed to comfort you, so I let the poor lad have his way. He was nearly broken-hearted when he left the farm last night, you were so terribly weak and low. I expect he'll nearly go out of his mind when he hears the news I shall have to tell him this evening. He'll offer up a grand prayer of thanksgiving before he goes to his bed to-night.'

But at this juncture, seeing that Nell's weary eyes had closed again, Mrs Llewellyn covered her carefully with the bedclothes, and went to communicate the fact of her improvement to the farmer. As the husband and wife were sitting at their evening meal, Hugh Owen, as usual, walked in. His face was very pale, and his expression careworn. His first anxious inquiry was naturally for Nell. When he heard the great improve-

ment that had taken place in her, and that Doctor Cowell had said at his last visit that she was now on the road to recovery, his pallid cheeks glowed with excitement.

‘God Almighty be thanked for all His goodness!’ he said solemnly, and then added rapidly,—‘May I see her, Mrs Llewellyn? Just for one moment. I will not speak to her, if you do not think it desirable, but to see her once more sensible and in her right mind would make me so happy. I shall hardly be able to believe the joyful news is true otherwise.’

The mother looked doubtful.

‘Well, I don’t quite know how Nell would take it, my lad. You’ve been main good to her, I know; but it wouldn’t do to upset her now, and you would be the last to wish it.’

‘Upset her! Oh, no; but I have sat by her so often during her illness.’

‘Ay, when she wasn’t aware of your presence; that makes all the difference. But,’ noting the look of disappointment in the young man’s face, she added, ‘I’ll

just step up and see how matters are now; and if Nell's sleeping you shall have a peep at her, in return for all your goodness.'

The young man thanked her, and in a few minutes she came back to say that her daughter was fast asleep, and, if Hugh would follow her, he should see so for himself. He rose at once, his face radiant with joy, and crept on tip-toe up the stairs and into the familiar bedroom. There lay Nell, prostrate in the sleep of exhaustion—her hands folded together on the coverlet, her head well back on her pillow, her mouth slightly parted, her breathing as regular and calm as that of an infant. At the sight Hugh's eyes filled with tears.

'Doesn't she look as if she were praying—thanking God for His goodness to her?' he whispered to Mrs Llewellyn. 'Oh, let us pray too. We can never thank Him enough for all He has done for us.'

And he fell on his knees by the bed-

side, Mrs Llewellyn following his example.

‘Oh, Father, God, Protector, Friend,’ said the young man, with tears running down his worn cheeks, ‘what can we render to Thee for all Thou art to us, for all Thou doest for us? We have cried to Thee in our distress, and Thou hast heard our cry. We wept in our abject fear of loss, and Thou hast dried our tears. Thou hast sent Thy messenger angels, with healing in their wings, to succour this dear child of Thine—this dear companion of ours—and give her and us alike time to do something to prove the sense of gratitude we have for Thy great love to us. Oh, Father, make us more grateful, more thankful, more resolved to live the lives which Thou hast given us, to Thee, more careful of the beautiful, earthly love with which Thou hast brightened and made happy these lives. Amen.’

No one could mistake the earnestness and fervour and genuineness of this ad-

dress, which Hugh delivered as simply as if he had been speaking to his earthly father in his earthly home. Mrs Llewellyn could not restrain mingling her tears with his. She told the farmer afterwards that Hugh's way of praying made her feel as if the Almighty were standing just beside them where they knelt. Softly as the young minister had preferred his petition, it seemed to have reached the sleeper's ear, even through her dreams, for as his 'Amen' fell on the air, Nell opened her eyes and said very softly,—

'Thank you, Hugh.'

The sound of her voice, and the assurance that his presence had not disturbed her, so moved his sensitive disposition that he sprung forward, and, sinking again upon his knees by her side, raised her thin hand to his lips and kissed it several times in succession, whilst his dark eyes glowed with feeling.

'Thank you,' again sighed Nell. 'Good-night.'

'Yes, yes, my lad, it must be good-

night, for you mustn't stay here!' exclaimed Mrs Llewellyn, who was fearful of the effects of any agitation on her invalid. 'You've had your wish and seen Nell, and you've prayed a beautiful prayer, and now you must come back to the parlour with me and have a bit of supper. Go down to the kitchen, Betsy,' she continued to the old nurse, 'and get our Nell another drop of beef-tea, and I'll be up to see after her as soon as the table's cleared. Bless her heart! if she isn't off again. She'll want all the sleep she can get now, to make up for the sore time she's passed through. Come, Hugh.'

But the young minister refused all her offers of hospitality. He felt as if food would choke him just then. He wanted to be alone to think of his great and unexpected joy—to thank the Giver of it over and over again. He walked home through the crisp October evening, wandering far afield, in order to commune with his own thoughts, and enlarging the prayer of thankfulness, with which his

heart was bursting, by another petition, that God, who had given this woman back to him and her friends, would give her to him also and altogether as his wife.

He did not see Nell again during the period of convalescence that she spent in her own room. But not one day passed without his presence at the farm and his thoughts of her being brought to her notice by some little offering from his hands. One day it would be a bunch of glowing chrysanthemums, from the deepest bronze to the palest pink and purest white. The next, he brought a basket of fruit—a cluster of hothouse grapes—to get which he had walked for miles, or a bunch of bananas, or anything which was considered a dainty in Usk. Once he sent her a few verses of a hymn, neatly copied out on fair paper; but these Nell put on one side with a smile which savoured of contempt. She was now fairly on the road for recovery; and even Hetty, who had been going backwards and forwards every day, began to find

the walk from Dale Farm was rather long, and that her mother-in-law needed a little more of her company. The services of the doctor and old Betsy Hobbs were dispensed with, and Mrs Llewellyn found there was no longer any necessity for her to leave all the churning and baking to her farm maids, but that she could devote the usual time to them herself. It was an accredited fact that Nell had been snatched from the jaws of death, and that her relatives need have no more fears on her account. Still Hugh Owen continued to pay her his daily attentions, till she, like women courted by men for whom they have no fancy, began to weary of seeing the flowers and fruit and books coming in every afternoon, and to cast them somewhat contemptuously aside. It was a grand day at Panty-cuckoo Farm when she first came down the stairs, supported by her father and mother—very shaky and weak, but really well again, and saying good-bye to bed in the daytime for good and all. Mrs Llewellyn

was a proud and happy woman when she saw her daughter installed on the solitary sofa which the house could boast of, swathed round in shawls and blankets, and a very ghost of her former self, but yet alive, and only needing time to make her strong again.

‘Well, my dear lass,’ she said, as she helped Nell to her cup of tea, ‘I never thought at one time to see you on that sofa again, nor downstairs at all, except it was in your coffin. You’ve got a lot to be thankful for, Nell; it’s not many constitutions that could have weathered such an illness.’

Nell sipped the tea she held in her hand, and wondered what was the use of coming back to a world that didn’t want her, and which she didn’t want. But she was still too weak to argue, even if she would have argued such a subject with her mother. As the meal was in the course of progress a gentle tap sounded on the outer door

‘Now, I’ll bet that’s Hugh Owen, dear

lad!' exclaimed Mrs Llewellyn briskly, as she rose to answer it. 'He'll be main pleased and surprised to see our Nell downstairs. He's been so curious to hear when the doctor would let her get up, and I wouldn't tell him, just to keep him a bit in suspense.'

She opened the door as she spoke, calling out,—

'How are ye, Hugh, my lad? Come in, do. We've got company to tea to-night, and you're heartily welcome.'

But Hugh shrunk back.

'I won't disturb you if you've company, Mrs Llewellyn,' he said. 'I only stepped over to hear how your daughter is this evening, and to ask her acceptance of these,' and he shyly held out a bouquet of hot-house flowers.

'Eh, Hugh, but they're very beautiful. Wherever did you get them?' said Mrs Llewellyn.

'I've a friend in the florist way up by Pontypool,' he answered, 'and I thought Nell might like them to make her room gay.'

‘To be sure she will, and give you many thanks in return. Come in and give them her yourself.’

‘Oh, may I?’ said Hugh, as he walked gladly over the threshold and saw Nell lying on the couch and holding out an attenuated hand to him.

She looked thinner even than when she had been confined to bed. People do, as a rule, when they first come downstairs. Her cheeks were sunken and white as death itself, and her eyes seemed preternaturally large and staring. But it was Nell, and Hugh Owen’s face grew scarlet at the mere sight of her.

‘Oh, Nell!’ he exclaimed, as he advanced quickly to grasp her outstretched hand, ‘this is a joyful surprise to see you downstairs again. Your mother had not prepared me for it. Are you sure you feel none the worse for the exertion — that it will not do you any harm?’

Nell was about to reply, but Mrs Llewellyn anticipated her.

‘Now, my lad!’ she exclaimed, rather tartly, ‘don’t you make a fool of yourself. You don’t suppose, do you, that I would let my lass injure her health after all the trouble and anxiety we’ve had on her account, by letting her do anything rash? Don’t you make any mistake about it, Hugh. What Nell’s mother don’t foresee for her, no one else will, let alone a stripling like yourself.’

‘Oh, Mrs Llewellyn!’ exclaimed the young man, turning all kinds of colours, ‘I am sure you must know—you cannot think that I would presume—who knows better than I, how you have nursed and watched over her? Only I — I — the natural anxiety, you know—’

‘Oh, yes, my lad, I know all about it. You needn’t stammer in that fashion, nor take the trouble to explain, and I’ve no call to find fault with you either, for you’ve been the kindest friend poor Nell has had in her sickness, and the most thoughtful, not excepting her own sister. But don’t fear but what she’s well looked

after, though I hope the day's not far distant now when she'll look after herself.'

'And so do I,' said young Owen. 'You're looking bravely, Nell, considering what you've gone through. It's been a sore time with you. Please God it may be the last.'

'Mother tells me you've been very good to me through it all, Hugh,' replied Nell, in a low voice, 'and prayed for my recovery scores of times. You meant it kindly, I know, though perhaps whilst you were about it, it would have been better to have asked the Lord to let me go.'

Mrs Llewellyn, seeing Nell was in good hands, had wandered away after some of her household arrangements, and left them by themselves.

'No, Nell, no; not whilst He has work for you to do here, and permits you to remain. Besides, think what a grief it would have been to your father and mother and sister—and to me, if you had died. We

could not have easily filled your place, Nell. You mustn't be sorry because you have been spared to make us happy. And why should you want to go so soon? You are young and beautiful—you don't mind an old friend like me telling you that, do you?—and have all your life before you. It is unnatural that you should be loath to live. It can only be your extreme weakness that makes you say so.'

'If you knew me better, Hugh, you would not talk like that. My life is past—not to come—and there seems nothing (that I can see) for me to do. I don't want to look back, and the future is a blank—a dark, horrible uncertainty, in which I can discern no good in living. I shall help mother in the farmhouse work, of course, now I have come home, but it will not be any pleasure to me. It is so different from what I have been accustomed to, and when all's said and done a dairymaid would do it far better than I. I have grown beyond it, in fact (though you mustn't tell mother I said so for

all the world), and so—and so—I think you are my friend, Hugh, and I tell you the truth—I would have much rather died.'

The young man looked distressed. He guessed there was more behind this statement than Nell would confess. But he replied to her appeal energetically.

'Your friend, Nell. You may do more than *think* it. You may regard it as an undoubted fact. I only wish I could, or I dared make you understand how much I am your friend. And as for there being no work for you to do, except household drudgery, oh! if you will listen to me, I can tell you of glorious work that lies close to your hand—work that would bring you both peace and happiness. Will you let me show it you, dear Nell? Will you listen to me whilst I point it out to you?'

'Another time, Hugh. Not just now, thank you, for my brain is still too weak to understand half I hear. When I am stronger, and able to take an interest in things again, you shall talk to me as much as you like,

for I am very grateful to you for all your goodness to me, and shall be glad to return it in any way I can.'

So Hugh left her with a heart brimming over with content, and a great hope springing up in it for the future.

CHAPTER II.

SUCH of the villagers of Usk who met Hugh Owen during the few days that succeeded this interview spoke to each other with surprise of the alteration that had taken place in his demeanour. The sober, grave, young minister, who had seldom smiled, and usually appeared too wrapped in his own thoughts to take much part in what went on before him, was now to be seen with a beaming countenance and an animated welcome for all whom he met.

‘Why, farmer,’ quoth one worthy to Mr Owen, ‘but what’s come to yon lad of yourn, the minister? Is he going to be elected an elder, or is he thinking of getting spliced?’

‘Spliced!’ roared the farmer, who, notwithstanding his pride in his learning and attainments, cherished rather a mean opinion

of his eldest son as a man. *Spliced!* the Lord save us, no! Where would Hugh get the courage to ask a lass to have him? He can't so much as look them in the face; and when his mother or Hetty brings one of the neighbours' girls in for a bit of a talk, he sneaks out at the back door with his tail between his legs, for all the world like a kicked cur. Married! Hugh will never be married. He wouldn't know what to do with a wife if he'd got one, not he. He's a minister, is Hugh—just that and nothing more. What makes you ask such a thing, Ben?'

'Why because I met him near Thomson's patch this afternoon, with his mouth one grin, and talking to himself as if he was preaching.

'“Why minister,” I says, “are you making up your next sermon?” and he says, “No, Ben,” he says, “I'm trying over a thanksgiving service for myself.” And he smiled as if someone had left him a fortune.'

'And yesterday,' interposed a woman, 'when my little Nan ran across the road and

fell down, and whimpered a bit, as children will, Hugh he was after her in a minute, and picked her up, and there he *did* kiss her as I never see. Nan, she didn't know what to make of it, and stopped crying from sheer surprise, and when I called out, "That's right, minister, nothing like getting your hand in for nursing," he reddened. Lor'! just like my turkey-cock when the lads throw stones at him.'

'Well, my woman, you needn't think he's going to nurse any of his own for all that. Hugh is too much of a scholar to bear the noise of children in the house. If Hetty ever gets any little ones I expect he'll find another place for himself. He said the other night that the old farm would never seem like the same again if there was babies in it.'

'He's up a deal at Panty-cuckoo, I hear,' said the first speaker.

'Oh, ay. That's all in his own line,' replied the farmer. 'The poor lass up there has been mortal bad—nearly dead, by my missus's account—and Hugh's

been praying with her and for her, and such like. And his prayers have been heard, it seems, for my daughter-in-law says her sister is downstairs again, and in a fair way to mend. I expect she brought the fever from London town with her. We're not used to have such fads in Usk. A young lass stricken down like an old woman. 'Twas an ugly sight, and I'm main glad, for the Llewellyns' sake, as she's been spared. 'Twould have been a sad coming-home else.'

'That it would,' said his friend Ben. 'And I expect it was thinking over the prayers he has put up for her as made the minister so smiling this afternoon. Well, he have cause to be proud, and he do pray beautiful, to be sure. My old woman say he bawl them so loud, that if the Lord can't hear *him* it's no manner of use any of us trying for ourselves. Well, morning to ye, farmer,' and off went Ben on his own business.

Hugh Owen would not have been over-pleased could he have heard them

discussing his private feelings after this fashion ; but, luckily for him, he did not hear them. It is lucky for all of us when we do not hear what our neighbours say of us behind our backs. We should not have an acquaintance left in the world if we did. But the young minister went on his way, little dreaming that anyone guessed the sweet, sacred hope which he was cherishing in his heart of hearts, and which he only waited for Nell's complete convalescence to confide to her. The time for doing so arrived (for him) only too soon, and often afterwards he wished he had been content to nurse his love for her in secret.

It was one day when she was downstairs again, looking so much older since her illness that people who had only known her in London would hardly have recognised her, that Hugh asked Nell if she would grant him an hour's conversation. Even then she did not think the request was made for more than friend-

ship; for she had spoken to Hugh Owen of her desire to train herself for better things than farm work, that she might be able, perhaps, to keep a comfortable home for her parents when they were past labour. This appeared to Nell the only ambition that could give her any interest in life again—the idea that she would repay in some measure her father's and mother's great love for her. Hugh might have thought of something, or heard of something, so she granted him the interview he asked for gladly, and received him with a kind smile and an outstretched hand, which he grasped eagerly and detained long.

‘You are quite well again now, Nell,’ he said, as he looked into her face, which was still so beautiful, though pale and worn.

‘Yes, quite well, Hugh, thank you,’ she replied. ‘I walked across the Park this morning to see Sir Archibald's old housekeeper, Mrs Hody, and had quite a long chat with her. The family is not

coming down for Christmas this year, she tells me, but have put it off till the cub-hunting begins, and then the Hall will be full. She gave me a clutch of golden pheasants' eggs. I am going to set them under one of our hens. Don't you like golden pheasants, Hugh? I think they are such lovely creatures.'

'I like and admire all God's creatures, Nell, and cannot understand anyone doing otherwise. I well remember your love for animals as a child, and how you smacked my face once for putting your kitten up on the roof of the stable, where she couldn't get down.'

'Did I? That was very rude. But I'm afraid, from what I can remember, that I always treated you rather badly, poor Hugh, and encroached upon your kindness to me. You have always been kind to me, and lately most of all. Mother believes I owe my life to you.'

'No, no, Nell, you owe it to the dear God, Who would not see us all plunged

into despair by your loss—I most of all. But if you really think you owe me ever so little, you can return it a hundredfold, if you will.’

Nell turned towards him eagerly.

‘Oh, Hugh, how? Tell me, and I will do it. Don’t think I have so many friends that I can afford to undervalue your friendship. I have very few friends, Hugh—very, *very* few,’ said the girl, with a quivering lip.

‘How can you repay me?’ repeated the young man, musingly. ‘Is it possible you do not guess? Nell, do you know, have you ever thought why I lead such a lonely life, why I have not married like Will? My brother is five years younger than myself, and most of the lads in Usk are thinking of getting a wife as soon as they can make their pound or thirty shillings a week. I make four times that as a minister, Nell, and most girls would think me well able to keep them in comfort and respectability. Yet I have never given a thought to one of them—*why?*’

‘Because you’re a minister, I suppose,’ replied Nell, ‘and all your mind is set upon your chapel and sermons and the open-air preaching. Isn’t that it?’ with a shy glance upwards to see how he took the suggestion. But Hugh only sighed and turned away.

‘No, no ; why should that be it? Because I’m a minister, and want to do all I can for God whilst I live, am I the less a man with less of a man’s cravings for love and companionship? No, Nell, there is a reason for it, but a very different one from what you imagine. The reason I have never given a thought to marriage yet is because when I was a lanky, awkward lad, there was a little maid whom I used to call my sweetheart—who used to let me carry her over the boulders in the river, to go with her black-berrying, to walk beside her as she went to and came from church. Though, as we grew up, I was separated from that little maid, Nell, I never forgot her, and I never shall. No other will take her place with me.’

‘Oh, don’t say that, Hugh, pray don’t say that!’ cried Nell, with visible agitation. ‘You mustn’t! It is folly—worse than folly, for that little maid will never be yours again—never, never!’

She uttered the last words with so deep a sigh that it sounded almost like a requiem over her departed, innocent childhood. But Hugh would not accept it as such.

‘But why, dear Nell?’ he questioned. ‘We have met again, and we are both free. What objection can there be to our marriage, if *you* have none? I would not hurry you. You should name your own time, only let us be engaged. I have told you that I can keep you in comfort, and if parting with your parents is an obstacle, I’ll consent to anything you think best. Only don’t send me away without hope. You will take all the spirit out of my life and work if you do. I think your people like me—I don’t anticipate any trouble with them, but the word that is to make me happy must

come from *your* lips, Nell — from yours alone!’

‘It can never come from them,’ answered Nell sadly.

‘Don’t say that, my little sweetheart of olden days. Oh, Nell, if you only knew, if I could only make you understand how I have kept your image in my heart all these years, how your face has come between me and my duties, till I’ve had to drive it away by sheer force of will. When I found you had come back to Usk, I thought God had sent you expressly for me. Don’t say now, after all my hopes and longings to meet you again — after you have come back from the grave to me, Nell — don’t say, for God’s sake, that it has been all in vain!’

He bowed his head upon his outstretched arm as he spoke, and Nell knew, though she could not see, that he was weeping.

‘What can I say to you, Hugh,’ she began, after a pause. ‘I *do* love you for

all your goodness to me, but not in that way. I cannot be your wife. If you knew me as well as I know myself, you would never ask it, for I am not fit for it, Hugh. I am not worthy.'

The young man raised his head in astonishment.

'Not worthy? What do you mean? *You*, who are as far above me as the stars in heaven. It is *I* who have no right to aspire to be your husband—a rough, country clod like me, only, only—I would love you with the best, Nell, if I could but make you believe it.'

'I *do* believe it, Hugh, and I am sorry it should be so, because my love for you is so different from yours. I regard you as a dear friend. I have no other love to give you.'

'You care for some other man,' said Hugh, with the quick jealousy of lovers. 'You are engaged to be married. Oh, why did you not tell me so before? Why have you let me go on seeing you—talking with you and longing for you, without

giving me one hint that you had bound yourself to marry another man? It was cruel of you, Nell—very, very cruel. You might have had more mercy on an unfortunate fellow who has loved you all his life.'

Nell shook her head.

'But I'm not bound to marry another man; I shall never marry,' she said in a low voice.

'Then, why are you so hard on me? Tell me the reason, Nell. There *must* be a reason for your refusal. You owe me so much for the pain you've made me suffer.'

'Oh, *how* can I tell you? What good would it do you to hear?' she exclaimed passionately. 'Cannot you understand that there may be a hundred things in a girl's life that make her feel indisposed to marry the first man who asks her?'

'Perhaps so,' he said mournfully; 'I know so little of girls or their feelings. But I think you might give me a better reason for your refusal, than that you are determined not to marry.'

‘Can I trust you with the story of my life?’ she asked. ‘Oh, yes, I’m sure I can. You are good and faithful, and you would never betray my confidence to father, or mother, or Hetty, or disgrace me in the eyes of the world.’

Hugh Owen grew pale at the idea, but he answered,—

‘Disgrace you? How can you think it for a moment? I would sooner disgrace myself. But how could I do it, Nell? What can you have ever done to make you speak like that?’

‘I’ve done what the worst woman you’ve ever met has done. Hugh, you have forced the truth from me. Don’t blame me if it hurts you. I am not a good girl, like Hetty, or Sarah Kingston, or Rachel Grove. I’m not fit to speak to any one of them. I have no right to be at Pantycuckoo Farm. If father knew all, perhaps he’d turn me out again. I—I—have *fallen*, Hugh! and now you know the worst!’

The worst seemed very bad for him to know. As the terrible confession left

her, he turned his dark, thoughtful face aside, and bit his lips till the blood came, but he did not say a word. Nell had told him the bitter truth almost defiantly, but the utter silence by which it was succeeded did not please her. What right had this man, who had worried her into saying what she never said to any other creature, to sit there and upbraid her by his silence? She felt as if she wanted to shake him.

‘Speak, speak!’ she cried at last, impatiently. ‘Say what you like; call me all the bad names you have ever heard applied in such cases, but say something, for goodness’ sake. Have you never heard of such a thing before? Have none of the girls in Usk ever made a false step in their lives? Don’t sit there as if the news had turned you to stone, or you will drive me mad!’

Then he raised his white, strained face, and confronted her,—

‘My poor, dear girl!’ he said, ‘who am I, that I should condemn you? I am far too conscious of my own besetting sins.

But how did this awful misfortune happen? Who was the man? Has he deserted you? Won't you tell me, Nell?'

'It happened soon after I went to London,' she answered, in a more subdued voice. 'I was very young at the time, you know, Hugh, and very ignorant of the world and the world's ways. He—he—was a gentleman, and I loved him, and he persuaded me. That is the whole story, but it has broken my heart.'

'But where is this "gentleman" now?' Cannot he be induced to make you reparation?' asked Hugh, with set teeth.

'Reparation! What reparation can he make? Do you mean marriage? What gentleman would marry a poor girl like me—a common farmer's daughter? And if it were likely, do you suppose that I would stoop to become the wife of a man who did not *want* to marry me—who did so on compulsion? You don't know me, Hugh.'

'But, Nell, my dear Nell, do you mean to tell me that this inhuman brute seduced you, and then deserted you? What have

you been doing since, Nell? Where have you been living? I thought you came here from service at the Earl of Ilfracombe's?'

'So I did.'

'And you were with him for three years?'

'I was,' replied Nell, who felt as if her secret were being drawn from her, bit by bit.

'Then you had a shelter and a home. Oh, Nell, do you mean to tell me that you did this thing of your own free will, knowing that it could not last, nor end lawfully? When you had a refuge and an honourable service, did you still consent to live in concubinage with this gentleman—knowing he only kept you as a toy which he could get rid of whenever the whim suited him?'

'I did!' she cried defiantly, 'if you will have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—there it is. I loved him, and I lived with him of my free consent. It was my heaven to live with him. I never regretted it. I only regretted when it came to an end.'

‘Oh, Nell,’ he said, ‘I thought higher of you than that.’

His evident misery touched her.

‘Hugh, how can I make you understand?’ she cried. ‘I believed it was for ever. I knew we could never be married, because he was so much above me; but I thought—he told me—that we should never part. I considered myself his wife, I did indeed; and when I was undeceived it nearly killed me.’

And, breaking down for the first time, Nell burst into tears.

‘There, there, don’t cry,’ said Hugh, wearily. ‘Remember, your mother might come in at any moment, and ask the reason of your tears. Try and restrain yourself. Your sad secret is safe with me, rely on that. Only—only let us consider, is there really no remedy for your trouble?’

‘How can there be? He is married; that is why I am here. For three years I was the happiest woman under the sun. He is a rich man, and he gave me more than I ever desired; not that I cared for

anything in comparison with his love. Ah, if he had only left me that, I would have begged in the streets by his side and been happy. But it all came to an end. He had gone away for a little while, and I had not the least idea that he was not coming back again. I was only longing and hoping for his return; and then one day his lawyer called to tell me that my darling—I mean that he was going to marry some lady, and I could be nothing ever to him again. Hugh, it drove me mad. I didn't know what I was doing. I rushed out of the house and threw myself into the river.'

'Merciful God!' exclaimed the young man, losing all control over himself.

'I did. Father and mother think I left service in a regular way; but they don't know in London where I'm gone. They never saw me again. I daresay they think I'm drowned. Was it very wicked, Hugh? I did so long to die. Isn't it funny that, first, I should have thrown myself into the water and been picked out again, and then

had this bad illness, and still I can't die? Why won't God let me end it all?'

'Because He designs you for better things, my poor Nell,' said her companion.

'I don't think so. Better things are not in my way. I believe I shall die a violent death after all. I remember some time ago—ah! it was the races *he* took me to—a gipsy told my fortune, and she said the same thing, that I should come to a violent end. It little matters to me, so long as it gives me forgetfulness and rest.

'You mustn't talk like that,' said Hugh, reprovingly. 'We must all die in God's time, and it is our duty to wait for it. But do you mean to say that this man has cast you off without a thought, Nell?'

'Oh, no! he offered, or his lawyer did, to settle money on me, but I would not take it. What did I want with money without *him*?'

'You did right to refuse it. Money coming from such a source could have brought no blessing with it. But surely you

do not lament the loss of this scoundrel who, not content with betraying you, has left you in this heartless manner for another woman?’

But no true woman ever let another man abuse her lover, however guilty he might be, without resenting it. Least of all women was Nell Llewellyn likely to stand such a thing.

‘How *dare* you call him by such a name?’ she cried angrily. ‘Whatever he may have done, it is not *your* place to resent it. I am nothing to *you*. He is not a scoundrel. There never was a more honourable, kind-hearted, generous creature born. He would never have deserted me if it had not been for his lawyer, who was always dinning into his ears that with such a property it was his duty to marry. And the woman, too, whom he has married—she inveigled him into it. I know she did. Oh, Hugh, if I could only kill her how happy I should be. If I could be in the same room with her for five minutes, with a knife in my hand, and stab her with it to the very heart,

and see her die—die—with pain and anguish as she has made my heart die, I think I should be happy.'

'Nell, you shock and terrify me!' exclaimed the young man. 'Do you know what you are saying? Do you know that in harbouring such feelings you are as guilty as if you had committed the crime itself? What has this poor lady done to injure you that you should cherish such animosity against her?'

'*What has she done?*' echoed Nell fiercely. 'Why she has taken my lover—the man whom I adored—from me. Torn him from my very arms. She has destroyed my happiness—my life. Made the world a howling wilderness. Left my heart bare, and striped, and empty. And I would make her die a thousand deaths for it if I could. I would tear her false heart from her body and throw it to the dogs to eat.'

Nell's eyes were flashing. Her head was thrown back defiantly in the air as she spoke; her teeth were clenched; she looked like a beautiful, bloodthirsty tigress panting

to fasten on her prey. But Hugh Owen saw no beauty in her attitudes or expression. He rose hastily from his chair, and moved towards the door. His action arrested her attention.

‘Stop!’ she cried. ‘Where are you going? Why do you leave me alone?’

‘Because I cannot bear to listen to you whilst you blaspheme like that, Nell. Because it is too dreadful to me to hear you railing against the wisdom of God, who has seen fit to bring you to a sense of the life you were leading, by wresting it from your grasp. You have called me your friend. So I am; but it is not the act of a friend to encourage you in such vindictive feelings. I could remain your friend though I knew you guilty of every weakness common to human nature, but I dare not take the hand of a woman who deliberately desires the death of a fellow-creature. Depend on it, Nell, that this unfortunate lady, who has married the man who behaved so basely to you, will have enough trouble without you wishing her more. Were it justifiable

to harbour the thought of vengeance on any one, yours might, with more propriety, be directed towards him who has probably deceived his wife as much as he deceived you !’

‘ If that is the spirit in which you receive my confidence,’ said Nell hotly, ‘ I wish I had never confided in you. Perhaps the next thing you will consider it right to do will be to proclaim my antecedents to the people of Usk. Make them the subject of your next sermon maybe ! I am sure they would form a most edifying discourse on the wickedness of the world (and London world in particular), especially when the victim is close at hand to be trotted out in evidence of the truth of what you say.’

Hugh raised his dark, melancholy eyes to her reproachfully.

‘ Have I deserved that of you, Nell ? ’ he asked.

‘ I don’t care whether you have or not. I see very plainly that I have made a fool of myself. There was no occasion for

me to tell you anything; but I fancied I should have your sympathy, and blurted it out, and my reward is to be accused of blasphemy. It is my own fault; but now that you have wrung my secret from me, for pity's sake keep it.'

'Oh, Nell, how can you so distrust me? Your secret is as sacred with me as if you were in your grave. What a brute you must think me to imagine otherwise.'

'I don't know,' she answered wearily. 'I have no faith in anybody or anything now. Why should you behave better to me than the rest of the world has done? No, don't touch me,' as he approached her, holding out his hand. 'Your reproaches have turned all my milk of human kindness into gall. Go away; there's a good man, and leave me to myself. It is useless to suppose you could understand my feelings or my heart. You must have gone through the mill as I have before you do.'

'At least, Nell, you will let me remain your friend,' he said in a voice of pain.

‘No, no, I want no friends—nothing. Leave me with my memories. You cannot understand them; but they are all that remain to me now. Go on serving God; devoting all your time and your energies to Him, and wait till He gives you a blow in the face, like mine, and see what you think of His loving-kindness then. It’ll come some day; for Heaven doesn’t appear to spare the white sheep any more than the black ones. We all get it sooner or later. When you get yours you may think you were a little hard on me.’

‘I think I have got it already,’ murmured poor Hugh, half to himself. ‘Good-bye, Nell.’

‘Oh, go, do,’ she cried impetuously, ‘and never come here again. After what you have said to-day your presence can only be an extra pain to me, and I have enough of that already. Go on with your praying and preaching, and don’t think of me. I sha’n’t come to hear any more of it. It does me no good, and it might

do me harm. It might make my hand unsteady,' she continued, with a significant glance, 'when the time comes, *and it has that knife in it!*'

She laughed mockingly in his face as she delivered this parting shot, and Hugh Owen, with a deep sob in his throat, turned on his heel, and walked quickly away from Panty-cuckoo Farm.

CHAPTER III.

THE Countess of Ilfracombe had had no desire to meet Mr Portland again; in fact, she would have declined the honour, had she not been afraid of exciting the suspicions of the earl; and she had not been under the same roof with him for more than a few days, before she was heartily sorry that she had not done so. Nora was a flirt, there was no question of that. She could keep a dozen men at her feet at the same time, and let each of them imagine he was the favoured individual. But she was not a fool. She had a countess's coronet on her head, and she had no intention of soiling or risking the treasure she had won. Mr Jack Portland was, as the reader will have guessed, the same admirer of whom

Nora had spoken to Ilfracombe before their marriage, as having hair of the 'goldenest golden' hue, and who was the only man for whose loss she had ever shed a tear. The earl had been a little jealous at the time, but he had forgotten the circumstance long ago. When the countess heard she was destined to meet her old flame again, and as the intimate friend of her husband, she had felt rather afraid lest her heart should ache a little from the encounter. But the first glance at him had dispelled this idea. Two years is not a long time in reality, but it is far too long to indulge in continual dissipation with impunity. It had wrought havoc with the charms of Mr Jack Portland. His manly figure had begun to show signs of *embonpoint*. His complexion was very florid, and there were dropsical-looking bags under his bloodshot eyes, and sundry rolls of flesh rising above the back of his collar, which are not very attractive in the eyes of ladies. His 'goldenest golden' hair had commenced to

thin on the top, and his heated breath was too often tainted with the fumes of alcohol. The habits he had indulged in had destroyed the little modesty Mr Portland had ever possessed, and he was so presuming in his words and looks, that Nora had been on the point, more than once since he had come down to Thistle-mere, of telling him to hold his tongue or leave the house. But then, there were those unfortunate letters of hers, which he retained, and the importance of the contents of which, perhaps she exaggerated. The fact is, that in the days when Mr Portland came to Malta to stay with the Lovelesses, he and Nora had made very fierce love to each other. There was no denying that, and the young lady herself had never pretended to be a model of all the domestic virtues. Her father had been very angry with her, and threatened to send her to England to a boarding-school. But the mischief had been done by the time Sir Richard discovered it. People generally lock the

door after the steed has been stolen. Not that it had gone quite so far with Miss Nora Abinger as that; but a great deal of folly had passed between her and handsome Jack Portland, a good many secret meetings had taken place, and many letters written. Oh, those letters, those written protestations of eternal fidelity; those allusions to the past; those hopes for the future; how much mischief have they not done in this world. We talk of women's tongues; they might chatter to all eternity, and not bring one half the trouble in their train as their too ready pens create. Mr Portland, not being approved of by the admiral, had found his visits to the house not so welcome as they might have been, and so the lovers resorted to writing as a vent for their feelings, and perhaps wrote more that they really felt—certainly more than they cared to think about or look back upon. Nora positively shivered when she thought what might, or might not be, in those letters which Mr Portland had promised to de-

liver up to her as soon as he returned to town. Meanwhile, she was on tenter-hooks and afraid to a degree of offending the man who held such a sword of Damocles over her head, and presumed on his power, to treat her exactly as he chose, with coldness or familiarity. But if she attempted to resent his conduct, Mr Portland could always give her a quiet hint on the sly, that she had better be very polite to him. So her life on first coming to her husband's home was not one of roses. She could remember the time when she had believed she loved Jack Portland, but she wondered at herself for having done so now. Perhaps it was not entirely the alteration which had taken place in himself, but more likely that her taste had refined and become more exclusive with the passing years. At anyrate, his present conduct towards her, in its quiet insolence and presumption, made her loathe and hate him. She wondered sometimes that her husband did not perceive the aversion she had for

his chosen friend, but Ilfracombe had been very subdued and melancholy since the day of their arrival. As Nora was so new to English society, and could not be presented at Court till the following spring, they had decided to pass their first Christmas very quietly, the Dowager Lady Ilfracombe, and the earl's two sisters, Lady Laura and Lady Blanche Devenish, being, with the exception of the obnoxious Jack Portland, the only guests at Thistle-mere. The Ladies Devenish were not disposed to make her life any easier than it needed to be to the youthful countess. In the first place, they were both considerably older than their brother, and resented Nora's twenty years and her vivacity and independence as an affront to themselves. She ought to have been humbler in their opinion, and more alive to the honour that had been accorded her. To hear her talking to the earl on terms of the most perfect familiarity, and just as if he had been a commoner, like her own people, offended them. And

then they considered that Ilfracombe should have married into the aristocracy, and chosen a woman as high born as himself. So they 'held their heads high' (as the servants would have said) in consequence, and elevated their eyebrows at Nora's repartees, when she was conversing with gentlemen, and frowned at her boldness in giving her opinion, especially if it happened to clash with their own. The Dowager Countess did not agree with her daughters. She thought Nora a very clever, smart and fashionable woman, and quite capable of filling the position to which her son had raised her, and supporting her title with dignity.

'Well, I don't agree with you, mamma,' said Lady Blanche. 'I consider she is far too forward in her manners with gentlemen. I'm sure the way in which Mr Portland leans over her when she is singing is quite disgusting. I wonder Ilfracombe does not take some notice of it. And what could be more undignified than her jumping up last evening to show

Lord Babbage what she calls the "Boston lurch?" Such a name too. I think some of her expressions are most vulgar. I heard her tell Ilfracombe that some place they went to together was "confoundedly slow." Fancy, a lady swearing! If those are to be the manners of the new aristocracy, commend me to the old.'

'Well, my dear,' said her easy-going mother, 'you know that times are altered from what they were. Now that so many of our noblemen are marrying American heiresses for money, you must expect to see a difference. Look at the Duke of Mussleton and Lord Tottenham! One married a music-hall singer, and the other, somebody a great deal worse! Young men will have their own way in these days. We must be thankful that Ilfracombe has chosen a nice, lady-like, intelligent girl for his wife. For my part, I like Nora, and think she will make him very happy. And,' lowering her voice, 'you know, my dear girls, that, considering the dreadful life he led before, and the

awful creature he introduced into his house, we really should be very thankful he has married at all. Mr Sterndale was afraid, at one time, that nothing would break that business off. But I feel sure Ilfracombe has forgotten all about it. He seems quite devoted to his wife.'

'Do you really think so, mamma?' asked Lady Laura. 'I think you are very short-sighted. Blanche and I have often said we were afraid he doesn't care a pin for her. Just see how melancholy and low-spirited he seems. He goes about with a face like a hatchet. I asked Nora yesterday what on earth was the matter with him—if he were ill—and she replied she was sure she didn't know. Such an indifferent answer, it struck me, for a young wife. But really one does not know what to make of the girls now-a-days. They are quite different from what they were a few years ago. I am sure of one thing, that Nora has no sense of the responsibility of marrying into the aristocracy. I heard her say once that she would just

as soon Ilfracombe had been a tradesman !’

‘Oh, that must have been meant for impertinence !’ exclaimed Lady Blanche. ‘What did she marry him for, then ? I am sure she can’t love him. She has told me she was engaged to six men at one time. Really, mamma, her conversation at times is not fit for Laura and me to listen to.’

‘Now you’re going a great deal too far,’ said the old countess, ‘and I won’t let you speak of Nora in that way. Remember, if you please, that she is the head of the family, and that some day you may both be dependent on her for a chaperon.’

This prospect silenced the Ladies Devenish for a time at least, and the subject of the young Countess of Ilfracombe was dropped by mutual consent. But their remarks on their brother’s low spirits attracted Nora’s attention to her husband, when she soon perceived that they were right. Ilfracombe was certainly depressed. He seldom

joined in the general conversation, and when he did his voice was low and grave. The earl was not a brilliant talker, as has been said before, but he had always been able to hold his own when alone with his wife, and used to relate every little incident that had occurred during the day to her as soon as they found themselves shut in from the eyes of the world. But he had dropped even this. Once or twice she had rallied him on his low spirits, and had made him still graver in consequence. But when others began to notice his moodiness, and make unkind remarks on it, Nora thought it was time, for her own sake, to try and find out the cause. It was after a long evening spent in his company, during which Ilfracombe had let Jack Portland and two or three other guests do all the talking, that his wife attacked him on the subject. Seizing hold of his arm as he was about to pass from her bedroom to his dressing-room, she swung him round and pulled him down upon the sofa by her side.

‘Not yet, Ilfracombe,’ she said archly. ‘I want to speak to you first. You haven’t said a word to me the whole evening.’

‘Haven’t I, my darling?’ he replied, slipping his arm round her slender waist. ‘It’s only because all these confounded women never give one time to put in a syllable. I wish you and I were alone, Nora. I should be so much happier.’

‘Should you, Ilfracombe?’ she asked, a little fearfully. ‘Why?’

She was so afraid lest he should get jealous of Mr Portland’s intimacy with her before she had the power to promise him she would never speak to the man again. But Mr Portland was the last person in Lord Ilfracombe’s mind. All he was thinking of, was the disastrous fate of Nell Llewellyn, and wishing he had had the courage to tell his wife about it before he married her.

‘Because, if we were alone together day after day, we should get to know each other’s hearts and minds better than we do now, and I should feel more courage

to speak to you of several little things that annoy me.'

'Things about *me*, you mean,' she said in her confident manner, though not without a qualm.

'Things about *you*, my angel!' exclaimed her enamoured husband, with genuine surprise. 'What is there about you that could possibly annoy me? Why, I think you perfection—you know I do—and would not have you altered in any particular for all the world.'

'Then why are you so depressed, Ilfracombe?' said Nora. 'It is not only I who have noticed it. Everybody, including your mother and sister, say the same, and it is not very complimentary to *me*, you know, considering we have only been married five months, is it?'

Lord Ilfracombe grew scarlet. The moment had come, he saw, for an explanation, and how could he make it? He feared the girl beside him would shrink from him with horror if she heard the truth. And yet he was a man of honour, according to a

man's idea of honour, and could not find it in his heart to stoop to subterfuge. If he told Nora anything, he must tell her all.

'Dearest,' he said, laying his fair head down on her shoulder, 'I confess I have felt rather miserable lately, but it has nothing to do with you. It concerns only myself and my past life. I have heard a very sad story since we came home, Nora. I wonder if I dare tell it to you?'

'Why should you not, Ilfracombe? Perhaps I can guess a good part of it before you begin.'

'Oh, no, no, you cannot. I would rather not think you should. And yet you are a little woman of the world, although you have been so long cooped up (as you used to tell me) in Malta. Your father told me, when I proposed for you, that I must be entirely frank and open with you, for that girls now-a-days were not like the girls of romance, but were wide awake to most things that go on in the world, and resented being kept in the dark where their affections were concerned.'

‘I think my father was right,’ was all that Nora replied.

‘And yet—and yet—how *can* I tell you? What will you think of me? Nora, I have been trying so hard to keep it to myself, lest you should shrink from me, when you hear the truth; and yet, we are husband and wife, and should have no secrets from each other. I should be wretched, I know, if I thought *you* had ever deceived *me*. I would rather suffer any mortification than know that, and so perhaps you, too, would rather I were quite honest with you, although I have put it off so long. Would you, my dearest?’ he asked, turning his handsome face up to hers. Nora stooped and kissed him. It was a genuine kiss. She had not been accustomed to bestow them spontaneously on her husband, but she knew what was coming, and she felt, for the first time, how much better Ilfracombe was than herself.

‘Yes, Ilfracombe,’ she answered gravely, ‘trust me. I am, as you say, a woman of the world, and can overlook a great deal.’

‘That kiss has emboldened me,’ said the earl, ‘and I feel I owe it to you to explain the reason of my melancholy. Nora, I have been no better than other young men—’

‘I never supposed you were,’ interposed his wife.

‘Ah, wait till you hear all. Some years before I met you, I took a fancy to a girl, and she—lived in my house. You understand?’

Lady Ilfracombe nodded.

‘Most men knew of this, and your father made it a condition of our marriage that the whole thing was put an end to. Of course it was what I only intended to do but I knew it was my duty to make some provision for the young woman, so directed Mr Sterndale to tell her of my intended marriage, and settle a certain sum of money on her. I returned to England, so happy in you, my darling, as you well know, and looking forward to spending such a merry Christmas with you, for the first time in our own home, when I was met with the news that—that—’

‘That — *what*, Ilfracombe? Don’t be afraid of shocking me. Is she coming to Thistlemere to throw some vitriol in my face?’

‘Oh, no, my darling, don’t speak like that. Poor Nell never would have injured you or anyone, and it is out of her power to do so now. She is dead, Nora—dead by her own hand. When she heard the news she went and threw herself into the river. Can you wonder if I feel miserable and self-reproachful when I remember that I have caused that poor girl’s death? that my great happiness has been built up on her despair? Oh, what did the foolish child see in me to drive her to so rash an act for my sake? I feel as if her dead face would haunt me to the end of my life.’

And the earl covered his face with his hands. Nora also felt very much shocked. Death seems a terrible thing to the young and careless. It takes sorrow and disappointment and bodily pain to make us welcome it as a release from all evil.

‘Oh, Ilfracombe,’ she whispered, ‘I am so sorry for you. Death is an awful thing. But I cannot see it was *your* fault. You meant to be good and kind. She expected too much, surely? She must have known that some day you would marry, and it would come to an end?’

‘That is just what Sterndale said!’ exclaimed the earl joyfully; ‘and you say the same. You do not spurn me from you, my own darling, because of the vileness of my former life? Oh, Nora, you are a woman in a thousand. I have been dreading lest you should find this disgraceful story out, or hear it from some kind friend. But now my mind will be at perfect rest. You know the worst, my dearest. There is nothing more for me to tell. We two are one for evermore,’ and he kissed her rapturously as he concluded.

Nora shuddered under her husband’s caresses, although they had never been so little disagreeable to her as now. How she wished she could echo his words, and say that she, too, had nothing more to re-

veal. But those terrible letters; what did they contain? what had she said in them, or not said, to rise up at any moment and spoil her life? She had never been so near honouring Ilfracombe as at that moment—never so near despising herself. But she answered very quietly,—

‘My dear boy, you have told me nothing new. Do you remember a letter that you received at the hotel a few days after we were married, Ilfracombe? You left it in the sitting-room, and were terribly upset because you could not find it, until the waiter said he had destroyed one which he picked up. He didn’t destroy your letter. It was *I* who picked it up, and I have it still.’

‘And you read it?’ said the earl, with such genuine dismay, that it completely restored Nora’s native assurance.

‘Now, what on earth do you suppose that a woman would do with a letter of her husband’s that she had the good fortune to pick up?’ she cried, ‘especially a letter from a young woman who addressed

him in the most familiar terms? Why, of course, I read it, you simpleton, as I shall read any others which you are careless enough to leave on the floor. Seriously, Ilfracombe, I have known your great secret from the beginning; and, well, let us say no more about it. I would rather not venture an opinion on the subject. It's over and done with, and, though I'm awfully grieved the poor woman came to so tragic an end, you cannot expect me, as your wife, to say that I'm sorry she's out of the way. I think it is awfully good of you to have told me of it, Ilfracombe. Your confidence makes me feel small, because I know I haven't told you everything that *I've* ever done; but then, you see,' added Nora, with one of her most winning expressions of naughtiness, 'I've done such lots, I can't remember the half of it. It will come to the surface by degrees, I daresay; and if we live to celebrate our golden wedding, you may have heard all.'

But Ilfracombe would not let her finish her sentence. He threw his arms around

her, and embraced her passionately, saying,—

‘You’re the best and dearest and sweetest wife a man ever had, and I don’t care what you’ve done, and I don’t want to hear a word about it; only love me a little in return for my great love for you.’

But Lady Ilfracombe knew the sex too well not to be aware that, if he had imagined there was anything to tell, he would not have rested till he had heard it; and, as she lay down to sleep that night, all her former love of intrigue and artifice seemed to have deserted her, and she wished from the bottom of her heart that she could imitate the moral courage of her husband, and “leave the future nothing to reveal.”

CHAPTER IV.

THE Dowager Countess of Ilfracombe was an amiable old lady, but she was also very fond and proud of her son, and anxious to preserve his interests. His long friendship with Miss Llewellyn had been a great sorrow to her, and she was rejoiced when she heard that he had made a respectable marriage. But the remarks of her daughter on Nora's behaviour had made her a little more observant, and for the next few days she watched the young countess narrowly. The consequence of which was that she determined to have a private talk with the girl, and the first time she found her alone she proceeded to the attack.

She was a sweet old lady this dowager countess, like her son in many ways,

with soft grey curls each side her face, and mild blue eyes and delicately - chiselled features. She drew her chair close to that on which her daughter-in-law sat, carelessly turning over the latest magazines, and laid her withered hand on the girl's slim, white one,—

‘Reading, my dear,’ she commenced pleasantly. ‘Is there anything particularly good in the Christmas numbers this year?’

‘Not much,’ replied Nora, laying the magazine down. ‘The stories are all on the same old lines. I wish they would invent something new. I think it is so silly to imagine that Christmas tales must all take place in the snow, or be mixed up with a ghost. Isn’t it?’

‘Very silly,’ acquiesced the old lady, ‘but as long as there are fools found to read them there will be fools left to write them. But where is Ilfracombe this afternoon? Has he left you all alone to the mercy of the Christmas numbers?’

Nora laughed.

‘It is my own fault,’ she said. ‘He

wanted me to go out driving with him ; but I thought it was too cold. So I think he and Mr Portland have walked over to Critington to play billiards with Lord Babbage.'

'Ah, I thought dear Ilfracombe had not forgotten his little wife,' said the dowager in a patronising tone of voice, which Nora immediately resented. 'He is too good and amiable for that. I am sure that you find him most kind in everything. Don't you, dear?'

The young countess shrugged her shoulders.

'So, so ; much the same as other young men,' she answered, and then perceiving the look of astonishment on her mother-in-law's face, she added, apologetically,—'You see, Lady Ilfracombe, that I'm not a gusher, and I've known so many men I've learned to pretty well estimate the value of them.'

'Perhaps, my dear, though I cannot say I think the knowledge an enviable one for a young lady. But you do not rank

your husband with other men, surely? He loves you dearly — anyone could see that—and you must have a good deal of influence over him.'

'Yes, I fancy I've got the length of his foot,' replied Nora.

'My dear son is almost all that a son and a husband should be,' continued the fond mother. 'He has no vices, but he has some weaknesses, and one is, being too easily influenced by his friends, and all his friends are not such as I should choose for him. I may be wrong, but I distrust that Mr Portland with whom Ilfracombe is so intimate. More than that, I dislike him.'

'So do I,' said Nora shortly.

A look of satisfaction came into her companion's face.

'Do you really, Nora? I am so glad to hear you say so, for I fancied that he was a great friend of yours.'

'What, Mr Portland? Oh, Lady Ilfracombe, how mistaken you are. If I had my will I would never ask him to Thistle-

mere again. But you won't tell *him* so, will you?' she said, looking fearfully round.

'My dear girl, what are you thinking of? As if it were likely. But, Nora, now you have told me so, I must tell you what is in my mind. Mr Portland has, in my opinion, been Ilfracombe's worst enemy for years. Not wilfully so, of course; but he is a man who almost *lives* upon the turf, and is always betting and gambling. He has no settled income, or a very small one. He is, in fact, an adventurer, though our dear Ilfracombe would be angry if he heard me say so. I am sure this Mr Portland borrows large sums of him. My brother, General Brewster, warned me of it long ago. He has also encouraged Ilfracombe in many things which I cannot speak to you about, but which a word from Mr Portland would have made him see the folly of. But he has been his evil genius. You must be his good genius, and rid Ilfracombe of him.'

The old lady smiled very kindly at Nora as she said this. She was so relieved to find that she did not stick up for the *vaurien* Jack Portland as she had feared she might do.

‘I? Lady Ilfracombe!’ exclaimed the young countess, with somewhat of a scared look; ‘but what could I do? Mr Portland is my husband’s friend, not mine. I don’t think Ilfracombe would hear a word against him.’

‘I think he would be the first to listen and approve, my dear, were you to complain to him of the offensive familiarity with which Mr Portland treats you. I don’t think it is either respectful to your rank or yourself. Several people have noticed it. To see that dissipated-looking man hanging over you, as he often does, at the piano or the sofa, with his red face close to yours, sometimes almost whispering in your ear before other people, is most indecent. Ilfracombe should put a stop to it, and the proper person to draw his attention to it is yourself.’

‘I hate it! I detest it!’ cried Nora, her face flushing with annoyance and the knowledge that she had put it out of her power to resent such conduct, as she ought to do. ‘I think Mr Portland is vulgar and presuming to a degree; but if it is Ilfracombe’s pleasure to have him here he would surely not like me the better for making mischief between them.’

‘I should not call it “making mischief,”’ replied the dowager. ‘I should say it was what was due to your position as Ilfracombe’s wife. However, my dear, perhaps you know best. Only, pray promise me to discourage that odious man as much as possible. I shall have to speak to him some day myself, if you don’t.’

‘Indeed, indeed, I will, Lady Ilfracombe. I will come and sit close by you every day after dinner if you will let me, and then he will hardly have the presumption I should think, to thrust himself between us.’

‘My dear, I should not like to put a

limit to Mr Portland's presumption. He is one of the most offensive men I have ever met. However, if you dislike him as much as I do, there is no harm done, and I should think, judging from your courageous and independent manner, that you are quite capable of keeping him at a distance, if you choose.'

'I hope so,' laughed Nora uneasily. 'Don't have any fears for me, dear Lady Ilfracombe. My only wish in this particular is not to annoy my husband by offending his great friend, whom he has commended over and over again to my hospitality; but, if matters go too far, he shall hear of it, I promise you.'

The dowager kissed her daughter-in-law, and felt perfectly satisfied with the way in which she had received her advice, telling the Ladies Devenish afterwards that they had taken an utterly wrong view of the young countess's conduct, and she only wished every young married woman were as well able to take care of herself and her husband's

honour. The Ladies Devenish shrugged their ancient shoulders as soon as her back was turned, and told each other that 'mother's geese were always swans, and, of course, anyone whom Ilfracombe had married, could do no wrong in her eyes.' But they ceased making remarks on Nora for the future all the same.

Meanwhile the young countess did all she could, without being positively rude, to discourage Jack Portland's intimacy with her. She kept as close as she could to her mother and sisters-in-law, and took every precaution to prevent herself being left alone with him; but perceived, in a few days, that Mr Portland had guessed the cause of her avoidance, and was prepared to resent it. If he could not get an opportunity of speaking to her privately during the evening, he would stand on the hearthrug and gaze at her with his bloodshot eyes, till she was afraid that everybody in the room must guess the secret between them. One afternoon, as they were seated round

the luncheon-table, he lolled over her and stared so fixedly into her face, that she felt as if she must rebuke his conduct openly. She saw the dowager put up her eyeglass to observe them, and the Ladies Devenish nudge each other to look her way; Ilfracombe, of all present, seemed to take no notice of Mr Portland's behaviour. Nora writhed like a bird in the coils of a serpent. She did not know how to act. She could have slapped the insolent, heated face which was almost thrust in her own; she professed not to hear the words addressed to her in a lowered tone, but tried to treat them playfully, and told him to 'speak up.' But it was useless. She saw Jack Portland's bloated face grow darker and darker as she parried his attempts at familiarity, until she dreaded lest, in his anger at her repulsion, he should say something aloud that would lower her for ever in the eyes of her relations. Who can trust the tongue of a man who is a habitual drinker? At

last Nora could stand it no longer, and, rising hastily, she asked the dowager to excuse her leaving the table, as she did not feel well. Her plea was sufficient to make her husband follow her, but he could not get the truth out of her, even when alone.

‘It’s nothing,’ she told him when he pressed her to say if she were really ill; ‘but the room was warm, and I didn’t want any more luncheon, and Mr Portland bored me.’

‘*Jack bored you!*’ exclaimed the earl in a voice of astonishment, as if such a thing could never be, ‘I never heard a woman say that before. Shall I speak to him about it, darling?’

But Nora’s look of horror at the proposal was enough to answer the question.

‘Speak to him, Ilfracombe? Oh, no, pray don’t. What *would* he think of me? It would sound so horribly rude, and when he is a guest in the house too. Never mention it again, please. I wouldn’t offend a friend of yours for the world.’

‘Thanks. Yes, I’m afraid dear old Jack might feel a little sore if I were to tell him he bored you. But it mustn’t be allowed to occur again, Nora. I’ll take him out of the house more than I have done. He won’t worry you this afternoon, for we’re going to ride over to the Castle together and pay old Nettleton a visit. I want to get a brace of his pointers if he will part with them. We mean to be home to dinner; but if we’re a little late, don’t wait for us.’

‘Very well,’ said Nora brightly.

She was glad to think she would be relieved from her *bête noir* for the afternoon at all events.

The earl stooped and kissed her, and ran downstairs. Nora would have liked to return that kiss, but as she was about to do it, she suddenly felt shy and drew back again. Women are so generally accredited with changing their minds, that when they do so, they don’t like to confess the truth. But she waved her

hand gaily as Lord Ilfracombe left the room, and sent him off on his expedition happy and contented. The afternoon passed quietly away; nothing unusual occurred until the ladies had assembled in the drawing-room, preparatory to dinner being served.

‘Ilfracombe particularly requested that we should not wait if he were late,’ said Nora to her mother-in-law; ‘so I think we had better not do so. I fancy he had some idea that Mr Nettleton might press them to dine at the Castle—any way that was what he said to me.’

‘I would give them ten minutes’ grace, my dear,’ replied the dowager; ‘the roads are very bad to-day, and they may not reach home as soon as they anticipated. It is so uncomfortable to come in just as the soup has been removed. Besides, they must change their clothes before dining.’

‘Yes, you are right,’ replied Nora, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece, ‘it is a quarter to seven now. I will

ring and tell Warrender to put off dinner till half-past. Shall I?’

‘Yes, my dear, do,’ the old lady was saying, just as Warrender entered the room unceremoniously, and with an air of decided perturbation.

‘What is the matter?’ cried Nora hurriedly, for she saw at once he was the bearer of news. ‘What has occurred? Why do you look like that?’

‘Oh, my lady!’ exclaimed the servant, ‘nothing, I hope—your ladyship mustn’t be alarmed, but I thought it right you should hear that—that—’

‘That—*what*? For God’s sake, speak!’ cried Nora impetuously. ‘It is folly to keep us in such suspense.’

‘Well, my lady, Johnson, he has just come up from the stables to say that the Black Prince—his lordship’s horse, you know, my lady—ran into the yard a few minutes back, without—without his lordship, my lady!’

‘Thrown!’ exclaimed Lady Laura shrilly.

‘Without Lord Ilfracombe?’ queried

Lady Blanche ; ‘but where, then, is Mr Portland ?’

‘Oh, heavens, my poor son ! He may be lying dead in the road at this moment,’ said the dowager, wringing her hands.

But Nora said nothing. She was standing in the centre of the room, motionless as though turned to stone. Presently she asked in a harsh voice,—

‘Have they sent out to search along the roads?’

‘No, my lady, they thought—’ commenced Warrender.

‘Thought? Thought? What is the good of thinking when they should act? Tell Johnson to go out at once and scour the road to the Castle, and let the carriage be got ready to follow him. His lordship may be unable to walk. Go at once ; don’t lose a moment. Stay, where is Johnson? I will give him the directions myself.’

She flew down to the lower premises as she spoke, regardless that her dress was quite unsuited to cold corridors and

stone passages. She was very white, but perfectly calm and collected as she gave her orders, whilst Lady Laura was shrieking in hysterics in the drawing-room, and Lady Blanche had her hands full in trying to prevent the dowager fainting under the dreadful suspense. As soon as Nora was satisfied that assistance had been dispatched in case of need, she went slowly up to her own room, with her hand tightly pressed against her heart. She could not realise what might be taking place, or might have taken place. She had only one fear, one dread, Ilfracombe and she might be parted before she had had time to tell him that she loved him. She kept both hands and teeth clenched to prevent her crying out, and making her cowardice patent to all around, whilst her cold lips went on murmuring, 'Oh, God, save him! oh, God, save him!' without any idea of the meaning of what she said.

She had stood thus, not having the heart or the sense to sit down, for

perhaps half an hour, when she heard a shout from the hall—a shout of laughter, and then her husband's voice exclaiming,—

‘So sorry to have given you such a scare. Not my fault I assure you. We came on as quick as we could. No, I'm not hurt. Was Nora frightened? Where is she? I must go to her. Down in a minute. Tell you all about it then,’ and his feet came flying two steps at a time up the stairs to her side.

She stood with clasped hands expecting him, all the blood in her body mantling in her face.

‘Oh, Ilfracombe,’ was all she could say as he entered the room.

‘My darling, I am so sorry that brute frightened you all so by coming home without me. Jack and I were within a mile of home when the Black Prince shied suddenly at something and threw me clean over his head. We tried our best to catch him, but he bolted to his stables, and I had to walk back.’

‘And you are not hurt?’ she asked tremblingly; ‘not at all?’

‘Not at all,’ he echoed, ‘only splashed from head to foot with mud, and feeling very much as if I would like to have a warm bath before dinner. But, love, you are shaking all over. Has it really upset you like this?’

Nora drew back a little, ashamed of having displayed so much feeling.

‘It was rather alarming,’ she answered, with a slight laugh. ‘We—we—might—never have seen you again.’

‘And you would have grieved for me?’ said the earl, pressing her to his heart. ‘Oh, my dearest, you make me feel so happy.’

A sudden impulse, which she could not resist, seized Nora. She threw her slender arms round Ilfracombe and laid her cheek against his. It was the first evidence of deep feeling which she had ever given him. But a moment afterwards she seemed ashamed of it.

‘There is no doubt you gave us a

start, dear old boy,' she said, smiling, 'but it is over now, and I'll run down and send Wilkins up to get your bath ready. You'll have heaps of time. I had already postponed dinner to half-past seven. Make as much haste as you can though.'

'One more kiss, darling, before you go,' cried the earl.

'No such thing! We mustn't waste any more time in fooling or the fish will be in rags. I will go down and see that Lady Ilfracombe has a glass of wine. The poor old lady has been crying fit to make herself ill.' And in another second she had left him to himself.

She found the drawing-room people in solemn conclave; the Ladies Devenish rather inclined to be offended at being disappointed of a sensation, and the dowager, telling Mr Portland of the terrible scare they had experienced, and how she thought poor dear Nora would go mad when the news of the riderless horse's arrival was announced to her.

‘I am sure I thought her mind was going, Mr Portland,’ she was saying as Nora entered. ‘She stood as if she had been turned to marble, and when she rushed from the room I thought she was going to fly out into the night air just as she was after him.’

‘Of course it would have been an awful thing for Lady Ilfracombe to have lost her position so soon after attaining it,’ replied Mr Portland politely.

‘And her husband,’ returned the old lady sympathetically.

It was at this juncture that Nora appeared. She was still pale from the fright she had experienced, and had lost much of her usual jolly, off-hand manner.

‘Ilfracombe will be down directly,’ she said, addressing her mother-in-law; ‘he is going to have a bath before dinner, as, though he has broken no bones, he has a considerable number of bruises from the fall.’

‘Of course, poor, dear boy,’ acquiesced the dowager. ‘Oh, my dear, what a

mercy it is no worse. He might have been killed from such a sudden fall. I shall never feel easy when he is on horseback again.'

'Never is a long time,' replied Nora, smiling; 'but won't you and Blanche and Laura take a glass of wine before dinner? I am sure you must need it after the shock you have had.'

The wine was rung for, and when Warrender appeared with it, and Nora refused to have any, Mr Portland took the opportunity of observing sarcastically,—

'Surely *you* must require some yourself, Lady Ilfracombe? I have just been listening to an account of the terrible emotion you displayed at the supposition of Ilfracombe's danger.'

The butler poured out a glass and handed it to his young mistress without a word. He had seen her excitement and interpreted it aright, but he did not understand why this gentleman should mention it as though it were something to be surprised at.

The young countess took the wine silently and drank it. Portland again addressed her.

‘It must have been an awful moment for you when Black Prince’s arrival was announced. Did you really think Ilfracombe was killed? It would have been a great misfortune for you if it had been so. The title would have gone, I believe, to a distant cousin, and the whole object of his marriage frustrated. And you would have sunk at once from the queen regnant to a mere dowager. Aren’t you glad he is all right?’

This was said *sotto voce*, so as to be inaudible to the rest of the party.

‘I do not see that it signifies to you, what I feel, or do not feel,’ said Nora, with her most indifferent air, as she turned from Jack Portland to address some commonplace to her mother-in-law.

‘By Jove, though, but I’ll make it signify!’ he muttered to himself, as he saw the Ladies Devenish secretly amused at the evident snub he had received.

The earl now joined the assembly. He was in high spirits, and disposed to make light of everything that had occurred. The evening passed pleasantly, though Nora was rather hysterically gay; but towards the close of it, when the other ladies had retired, and she was about to follow their example, her husband was told that his steward wished to speak to him.

‘Don’t go yet, Nora,’ he called out, on leaving the room, ‘wait till I come back. I want to tell you something before Jack and I go to the smoking-room. Keep her amused, Jack, till I return.’

It was Jack Portland’s opportunity, and he seized it.

‘What an actress you are,’ he commenced, as soon as they were alone. ‘You would have made your fortune on the stage.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ she said. ‘In what have I acted a part to-night?’

‘Why, in your well counterfeited dismay at the idea of danger to Ilfracombe, of course. When the old lady was

telling me about it, I thought I should have split. *You*—turned to stone with apprehension. *You*—the coldest woman in Christendom! who has no more feeling than a piece of marble! It is ridiculous. You know it was all put on.'

'Why shouldn't I feel uneasy if he is in danger? He is my husband. You cannot deny that.'

'Your husband, yes. And what did you marry him for? His title and his money! You cannot deny that. Two years ago you were, or fancied yourself, desperately in love with another man—modesty forbids me to mention him by name—but you chucked him over; why? Because he hadn't as much money as you expected to sell yourself for!'

'It isn't true,' she answered hotly. 'You know that it was my father who separated us and forbade your coming to the house again. Else, perhaps, there is no knowing I might have been your wife at the present moment. But as for being, as

you express it, "desperately in love," you know that is untrue—that it is not in my nature — that I am not one of your gushing, spooney girls, who are ready to jump down the throat of the first man who looks at them, and never was.'

'Well, I wouldn't be too sure of that,' said Mr Portland. 'Certain little epistles in my possession tell a different tale. Most of them are "spooney" enough in all conscience. At least, if you do not call them so, I should like to see the ones you do!'

'You have not returned those letters to me yet,' she answered quickly. 'I trust to your honour to do so, without reading them again.'

'Why should I read them again, *ma chère*, when they no longer interest me? I know you women like to think you can chuck your victims over, and still keep them writhing at your feet; but I am not one of that sort. Once repulsed is enough for me. Your ladyship need never fear that I shall ever trouble you again.

But don't say you never were one of the "gushing, spooney girls," or you may tempt me to make you retract your words. Perhaps you have quite forgotten what you wrote in those letters?' he demanded meaningly.

'Yes, quite,' she answered, though with a sickening faint remembrance of a great deal of folly; 'but what does it matter? It is over now on both sides, and we can remain good friends all the same. But I wish you would not make your intimacy with me quite so apparent before other people. It has been noticed by more than one person, and it places me in an unpleasant position. And if it is pointed out to Ilfracombe it might lead to something disagreeable.'

'How?' said her companion.

'How? Why, by making a quarrel between my husband and myself, of course,' replied Nora querulously.

'And would you care about that? He couldn't take your coronet from you for such a trifle, you know. Even those

letters of yours — were they to come to light, he might rub rusty over them, but he couldn't do anything. When a man marries a woman, he has to ignore all ante-nuptial indiscretions. He would make a jolly row, naturally, and you would have a hot time of it. But you are the Countess of Ilfracombe fast enough, and the Lord Chancellor himself couldn't unmake you so.'

'I know that,' said Nora. 'I don't need you to tell me so. And there is no chance of Ilfracombe seeing the letters either. If you keep your word to me (as I conclude you will), I shall destroy them as soon as they are in my possession. I wish you would send for your dispatch-box, and give them to me at once. I should feel so much more comfortable.'

'Why in such a hurry?' said Mr Portand. 'I am going home next week, and then you shall have them by registered post, honour bright. Won't that satisfy you?'

‘Oh, yes, of course. And Mr Portland,’ added Nora rather nervously, ‘we agreed just now that it was all over, so you won’t mind my saying you think I care only for Ilfracombe’s title and fortune, and I dare-say you are justified in thinking so—but—but it is not only that. He—he is so good to me, that I can’t help caring—I mean, it would be very ungrateful of me not to care, just a little.’

But here the young countess’s blushing, stammering confession was interrupted by her husband’s return.

‘Oh, here *is* Ilfracombe!’ she exclaimed, suddenly breaking off, and advancing to meet him, whilst Jack Portland thought to himself; ‘so the wind’s in that quarter now, is it? All the better for me; but I’m afraid her ladyship has sealed the fate of that interesting little packet. If love is to be brought into the bargain, those letters will become too valuable to me to part with. Why, I shall be able to turn and twist her, through their means, at my will.’

CHAPTER V.

THE time was altered at Panty-cuckoo Farm. Christmas had come and gone—rather a melancholy Christmas. The weather had been raw and chill; Mrs Llewellyn had been laid up with sciatica; and the farmer had appeared depressed and out of spirits. Hugh Owen had left off coming to the farm altogether, at which Nell was not surprised, though her mother grumbled, and her father said that with some people out of sight seemed out of mind. But with the advent of spring things grew better. Is it not always the way with spring? Its bright, hopeful surroundings seemed to make one ashamed of murmuring over one's own troubles. The bursting buds; the rivulets released from the icy grip of winter;

the callow birds; the balmy life-giving air; all speak of renewed action and strength, after the numbing effects of winter. One grows young again with spring. The buoyancy of the atmosphere, and all the glad sights and sounds that salute one's eyes and ears, seem to fill one with new feelings—new ideas—new hopes. Even Nell succumbed to the delights of the season, and felt sorry to think she had driven her kindest friend from her side. She had tried several times to see Hugh Owen, and make up her quarrel with him, but he always managed to avoid meeting her. There was a baby at Dale Farm now, over which Hetty and her mother-in-law were crooning half the day, with which, of course, old Mrs Llewellyn was delighted, but which Nell never saw without a sigh. She thought that when Hugh christened her little nephew, she would at least secure a word or two with him in private, but it was not so. He never turned his eyes her way during the ceremony, and

pleaded other duties as an excuse for not being present at the substantial feast which was spread for them afterwards at Dale Farm.

‘I can’t think what’s come of Hugh lately,’ said his mother. ‘He was never what you might call very sociable-like, but now it’s a wonder ever to get a word out of him. He seems to spend his life praying people out of the world, and I’m sure it don’t make him more cheerful at home.’

‘There, missus, let the lad alone, do!’ exclaimed her husband. ‘You know’d from the first that he was good for nothing but the ministry. He’s got no heart, nor stomach, nor liver, nor nothing, hasn’t Hugh; he’s just a minister and nothing else. He’s been as silent and as sulky as a bear for the last three months, but I take no notice of it. Let him go on his own way, say I, and thank the Lord, ’tain’t mine.’

‘Well, I suppose we’ve offended him, though I’m sure I can’t tell how,’ inter-

posed Mrs Llewellyn, 'for he's not been near us for ever so long. When our Nell was ill, he was at the farm every day, praying most beautiful, and bringing her books and flowers, and such-like; but I don't believe we've seen him, not to speak of, since Christmas, have we, Nell?'

'I don't think we have, mother,' replied Nell consciously

'Oh, that's plain enough,' said Farmer Owen. 'You ain't dying any longer, my lass, or you'd have Master Hugh at your bedside often enough. He don't care for lasses with rosy cheeks, and who can eat a good dinner, and use their legs. They've no interest for a minister. You shouldn't have got well, if you wanted to keep Hugh by your side.'

'Well, for my part, I wish she was better than she is, if we never saw Hugh again for it, begging your pardons, neighbours. But Nell ain't half satisfactory. Dr Cowell, he says it's only the weakness after the fever, but she's a long

time coming round, to my mind. She eats pretty well, but she hasn't got any life in her, nor she can't seem to take any interest in anything. Her memory too is something dreadful. She's always dreaming when she ought to be doing. We must see if we can't send her to Swansea this summer for the benefit of the sea air.'

Nell coloured faintly as she replied,—

'Now, mother, I wish you'd talk of something more interesting than me. I'm right enough. And we're all talking of ourselves, and forgetting the little man's health. Who'll propose the toast? Shall I? Here's to the very good health of Griffith William Owen, and may he live a long life and a happy one!'

And in the chatter and congratulations that followed the toast, Nell and Hugh were both happily forgotten. All the same, she wished he had not taken her communication so much to heart, and was dreadfully afraid lest his evident avoidance of Panty-cuckoo Farm should end by

directing some sort of suspicion towards herself. It was about this time that Nell perceived that there was something decidedly wrong with her father. Not in health, but in mind. He seemed to regard everything in its worst light, and to have some objection to make to whatever might be said to him. If her mother remarked how comfortable and happy Hetty was in her new home, Mr Llewellyn would observe,—

‘Ay, ay, it’s just as well she’s feathered her nest before troubles come,’ or if Nell said she felt stronger and better for the fine weather, it would be, ‘Well, I don’t know as it’s a thing to crow over. Many a person’s happier dead than alive.’

At last one morning she came down to breakfast to find him in a brown study over a lawyer’s letter, which had reached him in a long, blue envelope. The postman was a rare visitor at Panty-cuckoo Farm. The Llewellyns had not many relatives, and were not a writing family, if they had had them. Everything went

on too simply with them to require much correspondence. Above all, a lawyer's letter was a rarity.

'Had bad news, father?' inquired Nell, as she met him.

'Ay, my lass, as bad as it could well be. Sir Archibald Bowmant's going to raise the rent of the old farm again, and I don't know how it's to be made to pay it. Times have been awful bad the last year or two, Nell. Of course, the mother didn't say nothing to you up in London town about it. Where was the use? You was well provided for in a rare good and respectable situation; we knew you was safe, and didn't want to worry you with our troubles. But since Sir Archibald's married this new lady he's been an altered man. He used to think a deal of his tenants in the old times, and I don't say he's a bad landlord now, but she runs him into a lot of money, I hear, and then the land has to pay for it. Here's a notice from the solicitor, to say the rents will all be raised

again after next summer. It's deuced hard on a man like me. I've spent more than I knew where to put my hand on, this autumn, draining and manuring, and now I shall have to pay all I hoped to make by it on the rent. But it can't go on for ever. The worm will turn some day, and I shall chuck up the farm and emigrate.'

'Oh, father, don't talk like that!' cried his wife. 'What would you and I do emigrating at our age? 'Tisn't as if we were young and strong. We should die before we had crossed the sea. We'll get on right enough, now I've got Nell to help me with the dairy, and that must keep us going till you're straight again.'

'You're a good wife, Mary,' said the farmer, 'but you're a fool for all that. Will the dairy keep the men and horses, and pay for the subsoil dressings and the fish-manure and the losses which every year brings with it? You women don't understand the number of expenses

keeping up a large farm like this entails. I've only just done it for years past, and if the rents are to be raised, why, I *can't* do it, and that's all.'

'But you won't decide in a hurry, father?' said Nell.

'No, lass, no. But it's very discouraging. It takes the heart out of a man for work, or anything. Sometimes I wish I had emigrated when I was a young man. There, out in Canada, the Government give a man one hundred and fifty acres of land free, and, if he's got a little money of his own and a little gumption, he can make a living for his family, and have something to leave behind him when he dies.'

'Well, well,' said his daughter soothingly, 'if the worst comes to the worst, father, I will go out to Canada with mother and you, and we'll see if we can't manage to keep ourselves alive somehow.'

She put her hand on the old man's grey head as she spoke, and he got

hold of it and drew it down with his own.

‘What a soft, white hand it is!’ he said admiringly. ‘You’re a good, kind lass, Nell, but I doubt if you could do much work with such fingers as these. Where did you get them from? Who’d think you’d done hard work in your lifetime? They look like a lady’s, so smooth and soft. You must have had a fine easy place of it up at Lord Ilfracombe’s, Nell. It was a pity you ever left it. You won’t get such another in a hurry.’

‘No, father, I know that,’ she answered sadly.

‘And you think you were foolish to chuck it, my girl? You fret a bit over it sometimes, eh, Nell?’

‘Sometimes, father,’ she said in a low voice.

‘Ah, my lass, you see we never know what’s best for us. I was main glad to see ye home, so was mother; but if times get worse than they are, I shall be sorry ye ever came.’

‘Then I’ll go to service again,’ she answered quickly. ‘Don’t be afraid I’ll ever be a burden on you, dear father. I am capable of filling many situations—a nurse’s, for instance. If, as you say, times get worse, I’ll practise on little Griffith, and advertise for a place in the nursery.’

She spoke in jest, but Mr Llewellyn took her words in earnest.

‘Ay, my lass, and you’d get it too. The earl would give you a grand character, I’m bound to say. Wouldn’t he, now? Three years is a good time to stay in one place.’

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ said Nell hastily, as she remembered the circumstances under which she had left Grosvenor Square, and hurried away for fear her father should take it in his head to question her about it.

Poor Nell! Her absent lord was never absent from her heart or thoughts; but she dared not indulge herself in too much reminiscence lest she should

break down under it. Whilst Lord Ilfracombe was growing happier day by day in the increasing affection of his wife, the unfortunate woman whom he believed to be buried beneath the bosom of the river was wearing her heart out for news of him, and wondering often how she could possibly contrive to get sight or speech with him without attracting the attention of her friends. By day she had little leisure to indulge in dreaming; but as soon as night fell, and she found herself in solitude and silence on her bed, the ghost of her happy, reckless past would walk out of its sanctuary to confront her, and she would lie awake half the night, pondering on Ilfracombe's appearance, and recalling his tenderest moments and sayings and doings, till she had worked herself up into a state of despair. She had persuaded herself that her separation from her lover was no fault of his, but the combined work of Mr Sterndale and the woman he had married, and

that if Ilfracombe saw her again all his first admiration and affection would be rekindled.

Nell did not stop to consider how bitterly unfair this would be to his young wife. She hated the very thought of Nora, and would have injured her in any possible way. Lord Ilfracombe was hers—hers alone—that was the way she argued—and his wife had robbed her of him, and must take the consequences, whatever they might be. Her love for him was so deep, so passionate, so overwhelming, he could not resist nor stand against it. Had she only refused to let him leave England, his marriage would never have taken place. It had been a cheat, a robbery, a fraud, and such things never thrive. If they only met—if she could only meet him—he and his wife would both have to acknowledge the truth of what she said.

Meanwhile, however, she could gain no news of the Earl of Ilfracombe, her own act of supposed suicide having put

the possibility of hearing of him out of her reach. She could not come in contact with him again without her former position in his household being made known. For this reason, as long as she remained with her parents, Nell saw no chance of seeing him. And it was only at times that she desired it. At others, she felt as if the sight of her perfidious lover would kill her—as if she would run miles the other way sooner than encounter him; and these were the despairing moments, when she wept till she was nearly blind, and made her mother rather impatient, because she would not confess what ailed her, nor say what she wanted. The poor girl was passing through the gates of hell, through which most of us have to pass during our lifetime, in which whoever enters must leave Hope behind, for the portals are so dark and gloomy that Hope could not exist there. Some women will get over a disappointment like this in a reasonable time;

some never get over it at all; and Nell Llewellyn was one of the latter. Her very soul had entered into her love for Lord Ilfracombe, and she could not disentangle it. It had not been an ordinary love with which she had regarded him, but an ardent worship—such worship as a devotee renders to the God of his religion. I do not say that such women never love again, but they never forget the first love, which is ready to revive at the first opportunity, and which lives with them all through the exercise of the second, glorifying it, as it were, by the halo thrown over it from the past.

Nell was still in a state of hopeless collapse. She had not got over the news of Ilfracombe's marriage in the slightest degree. She was perfectly aware that he had shut the gates of Paradise between them for evermore; yet she often experienced this feverish anxiety to learn from his own lips in what light he regarded their separation.

Meanwhile her conscience occasionally accused her of not having behaved as kindly as she might to Hugh Owen—sometimes gave her a sickening qualm also, as she remembered she had parted with her cherished secret to a man who had apparently quarrelled with her ever since. He had assured her it was safe with him, but Nell felt that he despised her for the confession she had made, and might not his contempt lead him to forget his promise? She wanted further assurance that he would be faithful and true.

She went over to the Dale Farm far oftener than she had been wont to do (which Hetty accepted entirely as a compliment to her baby), in the hope of encountering him; but he always managed to slink away before she reached the house, or to have some excuse for leaving directly afterwards.

One afternoon, towards the end of May, however, as she distinctly saw him hurrying off through the fields at the back,

with a book in his hand, Nell waited till he was well out of sight, and then, altering her course, turned also and followed him up.

CHAPTER VI.

THE country was in its full spring-tide beauty. The hedges were gay with shepherds' purse and pimpernel, and merry with the song of birds rejoicing over their young. The green meadows were dotted over with the late lambs, skipping like the high hills of Scripture; and as Nell followed on Hugh Owen's track, she trod the sweet woodruffe under her feet. A balmy, south-west wind blew on her heated face, as she ran over the grassy hill, up which he was slowly wending his way, with his eyes bent on his book. She had captured him at last. A long stretch of grass land lay between them yet, but there was no friendly copse or orchard on the way in which he could take shelter from her. Not that Hugh

even knew of her approach. He had seen her coming up the gravelled walk that led to the Dale Farm, and slipped out as usual by the back-door, in order to avoid him. After her last words to him, he thought his presence must be as objectionable to Nell as hers was distressing to him. That she should take the trouble to follow him never entered his head; so he went on slowly, poring over his book, and was more startled than she could imagine when he heard a voice calling gaspingly after him,—‘Hugh! Hugh!’ He turned round then, to meet Nell’s beautiful face, flushed with exertion, as she panted to come up with him.

‘Stop, Hugh! Stop a minute! I want to speak to you,’ she said breathlessly.

He halted at her appeal, but he did not smile as she reached his side.

‘Oh, Hugh, I have wanted to speak to you for so long,’ said Nell, as they stood opposite each other. ‘What is the matter with you? Why do you never come to Panty-cuckoo now?’

He looked at her with grave surprise.

‘Why do I never go to Panty-cuckoo now?’ he repeated after her. ‘I should have thought you were the last person to ask me that question, Nell. Have you forgotten the words with which you sent me from you?’

‘Yes. What did I say? Anything very dreadful? How little you must know of women, to fancy they mean everything they say. You made me angry, I suppose, and then I resented it. But that is four months ago. It’s ridiculous to keep up a grudge all that time.’

‘I don’t think you were angry,’ replied Hugh, in his low, sweet voice. ‘I think you were in earnest, Nell, when you told me to leave Panty-cuckoo Farm, and never come back again; and that, after what had passed between us, my presence would be an extra pain to you. Was it likely, after that, that I could intrude my company on you? You must know that I didn’t keep away from choice.’

‘No, I didn’t. I thought, perhaps, you

considered me altogether too bad to associate with—that I should contaminate you and make you unfit for the ministry, and so it was your duty not to come near me any more. That is what I thought.’

‘How very little you know me,’ said the young man with a sigh.

‘But mother and father are always asking after you,’ continued Nell, hurriedly, ‘and wondering why you never come near us; and it makes it rather awkward for me, you know, Hugh. I have told them all kinds of stories to excuse your absence; but it would be much better if you could come and see the old people now and then. I would keep out of the way, if you prefer it, whilst you are there.’

He did not contradict her, only saying,—

‘I should be sorry to vex Mr and Mrs Llewellyn, who have always been very good to me. I hope they thought it was my duties that kept me away. I should

not like them to know that you and I have quarrelled.'

'But *have* we quarrelled?' said Nell, wistfully. 'Cannot we be friends still, Hugh, as we were before—before your last visit, you know? We are rather sad up at Panty-cuckoo just now. Father seems quite down-hearted about his farm. Sir Archibald has decided to raise the rent again, and father says he won't be able to make the place pay if he does. Sometimes he talks of emigrating. Fancy his doing that at his age! and, oftener, the poor old man says he has lived too long, and it will be a good day when he is carried to Usk churchyard. And, what with that, and—and—other things, I think sometimes, Hugh, that life is altogether too hard to bear; and it is a pity mine wasn't ended when I tried to end it!'

'Poor Nell,' said Hugh. 'No, don't say that. If your life had not held better things in store for you, surely the Lord would not have given it back to you twice running. But I must come

over and talk to your father, and see if I cannot cheer him up. If the worst comes to the worst, Nell, I don't see why he should not try his fortune in another country. He is not so very old—sixty or thereabouts, I think—and he will take his experience with him, and sell it, maybe, to other men. There are countries, as I daresay you have heard—like Canada, for instance—where Government gives the land away to men who can cultivate it; and your father must have a good sum of money sunk in his stock and implements. With a little money in hand, a man with knowledge may do wonders in Canada or New Zealand, and live out there as long again as he would have done in England.'

'Oh, Hugh, you are talking nonsense. How would father and mother feel, uprooted from the old place where they have spent almost all their lives, and set down in a strange country, without a friend or acquaintance near them? They

would die. They couldn't stand it. It would be too great a wrench.'

'Would not *you* go with them?' asked Hugh dubiously.

'*I?* Oh, yes, of course I should. But what good should I be to them? Only an extra burden. If father had a son it would be different. But he would require some strong young head and hand to lift the greater part of the burden off his shoulders.'

'I agree with you. But don't stand talking here. You don't look fit for that yet, Nell. Surely you should be looking more like your old self after all these months. Sit down on this turf, it is quite dry, and let us talk over what you have told me, together.'

He held out his hand to her as he spoke, and Nell availed herself of his assistance to take a seat on the bank by the side of the field.

'Oh, Nell!' he exclaimed as he released it, 'how hot your hand is, and how thin! Do you feel weak?'

‘Not over strong,’ replied Nell, laughing as they sat down, side by side. It was true that she had hardly gained any strength worth speaking of since her illness. The wild longings she indulged in—the regrets for her lost position, and the remorse with which she was occasionally attacked—were all working a great and abiding change in her constitution. The old people saw her going about as usual, and never heard her complain; so they thought she was all right, and attributed any little languor or daintiness on her part to her London schooling. But Hugh, with a lover’s eye, perceived the change in her vividly, and noted with grief the hollowness of her eyes and the attenuation of her hand.

‘My poor girl,’ he said tenderly, as he gazed at her thin face, ‘what have you been doing to yourself? You’ve been fretting sorely, I’m afraid, Nell, since I saw you last.’

This direct appeal broke Nell down. No one had given her such sympathy as this before.

‘Oh, yes, Hugh, yes, I have,’ she cried. ‘I try so hard to forget, but it seems impossible. I longed so much to come back to Panty-cuckoo. I thought the beautiful, quiet, peaceful country would heal my sore wound, and help me to forget. But it seems worse than the town. There, the rattle and the noise might have shut out other sounds. But here, in the peaceful silence, I hear voices and see faces that I want to shut out from my mind for ever. Oh, it is very hard that, when one tries and wishes to be good and do no wrong, God should let the devil have such dominion over us. Why is it, Hugh? Why doesn’t He hear our prayers and let us forget? Sometimes I feel as if I should go mad in Panty-cuckoo, when I remember the time when I was a little girl and went black-berrying or nutting with you and the other children, and remember those happy, innocent days can never, *never* come over again. Oh, Hugh, I feel as if I had been in possession of untold wealth, and I had deliberately thrown it away. Will it always

be so? Shall I never be any better? Am I to go on suffering like this to my life's end?'

'I hope not, Nell,' replied the young man. 'You are not strong enough for dairy and farm work, and it leaves your brain too little to do, so it broods incessantly upon the past. The work you want, Nell, is head work—something by which you will feel you are benefiting others. That is the employment to bring peace and forgetfulness in its train. You should be a missionary, as I am.'

'A missionary—I? Ah, now, Hugh, you are laughing at me. A preacher should have no sins to look back upon.'

'Then there would be no preachers in the world, Nell. I say, on the contrary, that no one can teach others till he himself has been taught of God. He cannot relieve suffering, unless he, too, has suffered. He cannot know the enormity of sin, nor the trouble it brings in its train, till he himself has sinned as we all have, and if any man says he has not, he lies before the God who made him.'

‘But not like I have,’ said poor Nell, with her face hidden in her hands.

‘Don’t you think, Nell,’ said Hugh, when you remember all the suffering and shame and remorse that your sin has brought you, that you could speak very forcibly to any girl whom you saw in danger of running the same risk? Would not you, out of the kindness of your woman’s heart, warn her not to do as you have done, and point out to her the pain that must succeed it?’

‘Oh, yes, of course I could and would, Hugh. It would be very cruel not to do so.’

‘Then, you see, you *are* fit for a missionary. You said just now that, if your father had a son to accompany him to a new country, emigration would be a different thing for him. Well, if he elects to go, *I* am willing to accompany him, and to be, as far as in me lies, as a son to him—aiding him all I can with my strong young arm and head—on one condition.’

‘What is the condition, Hugh?’ asked Nell.

‘That you will come, too, as my wife and helper. If you consent, I will show you a way to heal your sore hurt, that shall bring you the utmost peace at last. I don’t promise you happiness, though I would try hard to secure you that also; but peace I know you will have, for God will send it. Come with me, and be my helper and companion. We will go to some country, so widely different from England that nothing in it shall ever have the power to remind you of the terrible experience you have passed through here; and in a warmer climate you will, I hope, regain the health and strength which you have lost. Do you remember how you told me long ago that I was cut out for a missionary, and you were right. The very thought warms my blood. We will go to South Africa, or anywhere that is considered best for us all, and I will devote my life to securing the happiness of yours. Will you come?’

Nell turned round and look at him with astonishment.

‘Will I go to South Africa with you as your wife? Hugh, do you know what you are asking me?’

‘Exactly. I am asking you the same thing I asked you four months ago, and you refused.’

‘But you thought I was a different girl then from what you know now. I have told you all. I—I—am—’

And here she faltered, and looked down at the blades of grass she was twisting about in her hands.

‘Let there be no misunderstanding between us, Nell. Let me finish the sentence for you, and don’t be offended at what I say, for I speak plainly, so that you may be sure that I do not deceive myself any more than you. I know now that you have parted with the greatest glory of your unmarried womanhood; that you have, what the world calls, fallen; that you lived in a state of sin for three long years, knowing it to be sin, and wished for

no better lot ; and that even at this moment you would go back to that condition if you could. Do I speak too plainly, my dear ? Do I hurt you ?'

Nell shook her head, but did not answer him in words.

'Well, then, you see there is no need for you to tell me anything ; and if there were the remotest chance of your being tempted to go back to that life, or if the man you cared for were in a position to marry you, I would not dare ask you to share my lot. But there is no chance of either of these things occurring to you. The only future I can see before you is, to live in this simple place where you will have no distraction from your sad thoughts, and where maybe you will eventually die, from fretting after the impossible, or from remorse for that which can never be undone again. If you can make up your mind to leave England with me, I think I can save you much of this. I think I can lead your thoughts to dwell on something better than your past life, and reno-

vate your health by diverting them. I think that, with the help of God and time, I may be able to show you 'a way out of all this terrible trouble that bids fair to blight your youth, and live, perhaps, to hear you acknowledge that it was permitted in mercy to make you better able to sympathise with the sin and sufferings of your fellow-creatures. This is what I hope for, Nell; but I may be presumptuous in hoping it after all.'

'And you would make *me* your wife, Hugh; knowing all and hating all, as you do. Oh, it is impossible. You are too good for me. I am not worthy to marry you. I told you so from the first.'

'We need not talk of worthiness or unworthiness to one another,' answered Hugh. 'We are man and woman, and I love you. That is quite enough. The matter lies between ourselves alone. No one else will ever hear of it.'

'Ah Hugh, forgive me, but I *don't* love you. Therein lies all the difference. I will not deceive you in the slightest

particular. My heart still clings to, and is wrapped up in this—this—man. I cannot forget him. I cannot un-love him. For three long happy years he taught me to regard him as my husband, and the fact that he never married me in church makes no difference to my affection. I am sorry—I grieve deeply night and day that he has left me in so cruel a manner, but still I love him. I am more like a widow than a wicked girl. I suppose it is part of my wickedness—the greatest part perhaps—that I *cannot* feel how wicked I have been. I only know that my husband has left me for another woman, and that he cannot have realised what my love for him was, or he never would have done it. Is that very wicked?’ said Nell, as she looked up into the young man’s face.

The answer he made her was very different from what she expected of him.

‘No, Nell, it is not wicked. If I had not known that *that* was the way in which you regarded the past I would not have

asked you to be my wife. But the heart that can be so faithful to one man—the man who has betrayed it—will be as faithful to another when once its tears are dried for the first. I, too, look on you as a widow, as something far more to be pitied than a widow. But it is all over now, my poor girl. You know that without my telling you; so, whether you can forget it or not, let me try to make the remainder of your life useful and happy. Will you, Nell?’

‘Oh, Hugh, you are too good. I never knew anyone so good and kind in all my life before. If—if—we went far away from England and all its dreadful associations, where we should hardly ever hear its name again, I think I could be happy, or at least contented with you as my friend. And if, Hugh, it was some little time before I could think of you in any other light than that of a friend you would not be angry, would you? You would be a little patient with me, and remember how much I have suffered—

how hardly I have been used—until I feel as if I could never trust to a man's promises again.'

'If you will come with me to South Africa and help me in my missionary work, Nell,' said Hugh, as he took the listless hand hanging down by her side and pressed it softly, 'I will never ask you for the affection nor the duty of a wife till you can tell me that you are ready and willing to give it me. Will you trust me so far—that if the love I long for should never spring up in your heart for me I will never demand it, nor worry you because it is not there, but still do my utmost to teach you how to lighten your heavy burden by working for God and God's creatures? Do you believe me? Will you trust me?'

'Yes, Hugh, yes. I will trust you through everything. And if father and mother should elect to emigrate and leave the dear old farm for good and all, why, I will go with them and you—as your wife.'

And she held out her hand to him as she concluded. Hugh seized it, and carried it to his lips.

‘You have made me so happy!’ he exclaimed. ‘Oh, Nell, whether as friends, or as husband and wife, you are *my* Nell now for evermore, and I will never let you go again.’

CHAPTER VII.

As Nell walked back to Panty-cuckoo alone (for she would not let Hugh accompany her) she could not decide if she were pleased or sorry at what had taken place between them. Certainly she did not realise it. She was as much Lord Ilfracombe's widow as she had been on setting out, and did not feel like the betrothed of anybody. But one thing did seem to please her—the idea of leaving England and all its sad associations behind, and going to a new country, to live amidst new surroundings and new people. Her heart had been growing faint and sick with England for a long time past. To go to South Africa; to sail on the sea; to see the wondrous vegetation that adorns it—the hedges of cacti, the bowers

of orange-trees, the ostriches and the gorillas; all the wonders, in fact, of which she had read in the books which Hugh had lent her—this was what she thought of most as she wended her way slowly homewards. If an occasional remembrance struck her that they could not be enjoyed without the accompaniment of Hugh's society she put it from her with a slight frown, and fell to thinking of the other instead. Hugh had said he would not worry her; that she should do exactly as she pleased; that he would ask nothing from her till she was ready to grant it; and Hugh was a man of his word. He would not say one thing and do another. She was quite safe with him. They would go out to Africa together, and whilst he taught the men and preached to them she would be kind and helpful to the mothers and the little black children, and show them how to make their clothes, and take care of their health, and cook their food. She pictured herself clad in a white dress, with a broad straw hat on,

walking amongst her sable sisters, nursing them when they were sick, or joining in their merry-makings and festivities. She could better forget there, Nell said to herself, than in a country that reminded her at every turn of what she had lost. And Hugh was very good to her, there was no doubt of that, and would guard and protect her from further evil till her life's end. He knew her secret, and he did not despise her for it, that was more than she could say for anybody else. Even the servants in Grosvenor Square, over whom she had reigned supreme, had shown her, but too plainly, as soon as they dared, that they considered her a little lower than themselves. She dared not think what her father and mother and Hetty would say if they were made cognisant of the truth. Nell knew her parents' strict ideas on propriety too well. Her mother would upbraid her for having brought the first shame into their virtuous family—her father would, in all probability, turn her out of the house, and tell her her

presence contaminated both her mother and her sister. The poor, when virtuous, are very virtuous indeed. They cannot understand the temptations of the upper classes and those who are thrown in contact with them, because they are not subjected to the same themselves. What working man has the leisure to go after his neighbour's wife? When his day's labour is over he is too tired to go courting, to say nothing of the fact that his neighbour's task is over at the same time, and he is keeping safe guard over his sheepfold. No, her own people would show no sympathy for her disgrace! Nell was quite aware of that. Hugh, who was so good himself and a minister of the gospel, was the only one she would have dared tell her story to, and he could so far overlook it as to wish to make her his wife. She owed Hugh something, and some day, perhaps, she might repay the debt. At present, however, what had passed between them was to remain with themselves. She had made him promise that.

She felt if it were made public property she could never get out of it again. What with the Owens and the Llewellyns she would be forced into a marriage, to think of which made her shudder. Things must go on exactly as usual, till she knew what was going to happen at Panty-cuckoo Farm, and then, if her father decided to emigrate (which was by no means likely at present), it would be time for her to make up her mind. Meanwhile, it all seemed a long way off, and Nell felt easier for the concession she had accorded Hugh. She had experienced so many qualms as to whether she had been wise in placing confidence in him, but now there was no doubt that he would respect her secret for his own sake as well as hers. So she went back to Panty-cuckoo Farm in better spirits than she had displayed for some time past, and found her mother in close converse with Mrs Hody, the housekeeper from Usk Hall. The two women had tea spread before them, and were evidently going in for a regular 'confab.'

‘Going to raise the rents again,’ old Mrs Hody was saying as Nell walked into the room. ‘Well, I never. I wonder Mr Bastian, the steward, didn’t tell me of it. I expect he was too much ashamed. Not that it’s his doing, poor man. He can only follow the master’s lead. But, dear me, Mrs Llewellyn, it’s easy to guess who is at the bottom of it. It’s my lady’s high jinks and no mistake. It would take twice Sir Archibald’s money to cover them. Now, there’s all new papering to be put up in the bedrooms. I’m sure the paper was good enough for anybody. It’s not been up more than a couple o’ years, but there’s to be a grand party at the hall this summer, and I suppose nothing is too good for ’em.’

‘When are the family coming home, Mrs Hody?’ asked Nell.

‘Next month, my lass, and you’d better get your best gowns ready, for there’s to be a power of young gentlemen with them and no mistake. I’ve just been talking to your mother here about her rooms. I wish

she could let us have the use of four, just for a month or two, for where I'm to put them all I don't know.'

'But it is impossible, Mrs Hody, or I'd willingly oblige you. But you know I couldn't do it even before my Nell came home, and it is more impossible than ever now.'

'I could lend you the furniture,' said the housekeeper, coaxingly, 'if that's the obstacle. We've got enough stowed away at the top of the house to furnish five or six rooms. We make up sixteen beds ourselves, but they'll be all full. Whatever they can want with such a heap of guests beats me. I've been up the village this afternoon to see if the Wilkins' or Turners' girls were at home, for we shall want extra help, but, like my luck, they're all in service.'

'Perhaps our Nell here might be of use to you, Mrs Hody,' interposed Mrs Llewellyn. 'She's been used to service, you know, and I guess she's a good hand at it. What say, Nell? Will ye go up to

the Hall and help Mrs Hody when the folks arrive?’

Nell grew scarlet. What if some of the ‘folks’ should have seen her in London and recognise her!

‘Oh, no, mother,’ she exclaimed, shrinking back, ‘I couldn’t! I don’t know enough about it. I’ve never been in any place, remember, except in the nursery and then as housekeeper. I have never done any housework or cooking.’

Mrs Hody looked at the girl’s beautiful face suspiciously.

‘You’re very young for a housekeeper, especially since you can have had no previous experience. Who engaged you for the place?’

‘Lord Ilfracombe,’ replied Nell timidly—she always became timid when the earl was alluded to.

‘And what aged man was he, my dear?’ continued Mrs Hody.

‘Oh, I don’t know—somewhere between twenty and thirty, I suppose; quite young, of course, but I hardly ever saw him. He was often absent from home.’

‘And how did the servants like taking their orders from such a lass as you? Didn’t they give you trouble sometimes?’ went on her inquisitor.

‘Oh, no, they were all old servants. They knew their duty,’ said Nell confusedly, and then she added, to hide her embarrassment,—‘But do tell me, Mrs Hody, the names of some of the visitors you are expecting. It is such an event to see strangers in Usk. Are there lords and ladies amongst them?’

‘Lords and ladies, my dear. Why, they’re most all lords and ladies this time, asked on purpose to meet a royal prince, who has condescended to stay for a week with Sir Archibald. Lor’! what a fuss my lady will make over him, to be sure. I expect she’s half wild with joy that he is coming. And there’ll be more cards and high play than ever, I suppose, and turning night into day, as I’ve just been telling your good mother. No one in bed till two or three in the morning, and candles left guttering all over the tablecloths, and

wine spilt over the carpets, and there—it makes me sick to talk of it. I do declare if the play goes on this time as it did last year, I shall give Sir Archibald warning. It's scandalous! I did hear as one poor man—Captain Trelany was his name—was quite ruined by it, and has been obliged to sell out of his regiment in consequence and go abroad. Such a wicked thing for a man of Sir Archibald's age to encourage in his house, but there! it's all *her* fault. She don't go on a bit like a married lady, and I don't care who hears me say so. A running after gents as she does, screaming and laughing like a schoolgirl, and driving over the place like a mad woman. I'm sure I wish sometimes I'd never set eyes on her face.'

'Ah, I'm glad our Nell has nothing to do with such,' said Mrs Lewellyn, 'for it must be a bad example for a young girl. My daughters have been brought up steady and respectable, and if I thought they would ever take to such ways, it would break my heart.'

‘What gentlemen are you going to send to mother, Mrs Hody?’ said Nell to turn the conversation.

‘I don’t know yet, my dear, but they are sure to be bachelors, so don’t you listen to any nonsense they may say to you. Young gentlemen are not half particular enough in these days. They talk a lot of rubbish to a pretty girl and mean nothing by it, whilst she maybe takes it all for gospel truth, and cries her eyes out when she finds it was only their fun. Men always have been took, and always will be took by a pretty face to the end of time, and think it’s an honour for any poor girl to receive notice from them; but don’t you believe nothing they may say to you, Nell, for gentlemen marry for money now-a-days and nothing else it strikes me.’

But at this adjuration Mrs Llewellyn ruffled up her feathers like an old hen when her chickens are attacked.

‘You needn’t come for to give such

advice to any girl of mine, Mrs Hody!' she exclaimed, quite hotly, 'for it isn't needed. Believe any rubbish a gentleman born might say to her! I should think not, indeed. Nell is much too sensible for that. She knows that gentleman's compliments mean no good for poor girls, and would not encourage such a thing for a moment. My lasses are not like the Simpsons, Mrs Hody, nor yet the Manleys. They've never been allowed to run loose for anyone to talk to, but been reared in a God-fearing way and taught that His eye is on them everywhere. There's no occasion for you to caution them. I can assure you, I would rather see Nell stretched dead at my feet, than think her capable of such folly. Why, who knows what it might lead to? Gentlemen have flattering tongues sometimes for country girls, and put all sorts of silly ideas into their heads. If I thought our Nell would even speak to such lodgers as you may choose to send us, Mrs Hody, I wouldn't let my rooms

to you, not if you gave me ten pounds a week for them, there !’

And Mrs Llewellyn, quite exhausted by her efforts, stopped talking and wiped her steaming face with her apron.

‘Oh, mother, dear, why make so much of it?’ said Nell, with cheeks of crimson. ‘I am sure Mrs Hody never thought that I or Hetty would behave ourselves in an unseemly way with your lodgers. It was only a kindly caution on her part. And you need have no fear for me, believe me.’

‘No, indeed, Mrs Llewellyn,’ interposed the housekeeper, anxious to make peace with her hostess, ‘I only put in my little word on account of your Nell here being so handsome, and I, knowing but too well what some of the gentlemen as come to the Hall are. Why, didn’t one of ’em wrong poor little Katie Brown only last autumn twelve-month, stuffing the poor child’s head up with some nonsense about marriage not being necessary, and that he’d stick to

her all his life, and then going off when the shooting was over and leaving her with a baby at her back. Tom Brown was after bringing an action against the gentleman—Mr Frank Leyton, it was—and getting some money out of him for his daughter's shame; but the lawyer advised him not, for there was no evidence except Katie's word, and that wouldn't be enough in a court of justice, he said. I've taken good care not to have any pretty girls about the Hall since, and if your Nell had come up to help me, I would have kept her out of their way, for such a set of unprincipled vagabonds I never see before !'

'No, thank you, Mrs Hody,' replied Mrs Llewellyn, grandly, 'no amount of wages would make me send a girl of mine up to the Hall after what you've told me. My daughters have been very humbly born and bred, but they are good, virtuous lassies, though, perhaps, I should not be the one to

say it. It would break my heart if I could think them capable of taking up with folks as never meant to marry them, and as for their father, well, I do believe he'd take a gun and shoot 'em if he knew of it. So, our Nell, she'll keep down at Panty-cuckoo, if you please, whilst your family's at home, and do her duty by keeping the lodgers' rooms clean and tidy, instead of making the acquaintance of their occupants.'

'There, there, mother, say no more about it, pray!' cried Nell in real distress, as she carried off the tea-tray in order to hide her burning cheeks.

It was such conversations as these that made her fearful to think what might happen if her secret ever became known to her parents; which made her contemplate the thought of South Africa with something very much like gratitude, and even remember the condition attached to it without a shudder. She had quite made up her mind by this time that she should never see

the Earl of Ilfracombe again. She had never heard him mention Usk, nor even Wales. It was not likely, in her simple ideas, that he would ever find his way there; she thought that they were as widely separated as if the sea divided them. She had but two alternatives—either to end her days at Panty-cuckoo Farm, in the maddeningly quiet manner she was passing them now, or to become Hugh Owen's wife and go away with him, far, far from everything that could possibly remind her of the happy, thoughtless time she had believed would never end; and, of the two, the last appeared to be the best to her. Yet not without her parents. That was, of course, plainly understood between Hugh and herself. But her father still talked despondingly of his prospects, and of the ultimate necessity of his making some change, and Nell seemed to see the future looming before her, even though it was as yet no larger than a man's hand. Hugh Owen had resumed

his visits to the farm, much to the content of Mrs Llewellyn, and, sometimes, he and Nell took a stroll together in the summer evenings. Only as friends, though. Notwithstanding the half promise she had made him, Nell would not permit him to consider himself anything more than her friend until the matter was finally settled between them, and the young man was quite content it should be so. Perhaps he required a little time also, to recover the great shock experienced on hearing Nell's story, and preferred to gain her complete confidence and friendship before asking for any closer privilege. But he was happy in knowing that she trusted him, and never doubted but that the end for both of them would be a perfect union.

So the time went on until May was over, and Mrs Hody announced that she would require Mrs Llewellyn's bedrooms for two gentlemen on the following day. The task of preparing them was confided to Nell. There was no

rough work to be done—Mrs Llewellyn's rooms being always kept in spick-and-span order—but the linen sheets had to be taken out of the old walnut-wood press, where they had lain for the last year between sprigs of sweet lavender, and aired before the kitchen fire, and the creases ironed out before they were put upon the beds. Then the fair white toilet-covers, trimmed with lace made by the farmer's great-grandmother, were spread upon the dressing-tables and chest of drawers, and every speck of dust flicked off the polished furniture. Clean lace curtains were hung before the windows, about which clambered the honeysuckles and roses, which poor Nell used to see in her London dreams, and before which lay the beds of flowers which adorned the side of the farmhouse. These two rooms, as has been said before, lay apart from the rest of the domain, and opened into the bricked passage at the back of the parlour. They had a little private entrance

of their own, and, when they were occupied, the lodgers were allowed to come in and out as they chose. This was absolutely necessary with the guests of Sir Archibald Bowmant, as the revelries of Usk Hall were kept up so late, that the Llewellyns could not possibly have sat up for them. So, in that primitive place, where latch-keys were unknown and robbery was unheard of, the simple farmers left their side-door unfastened, and scarcely ever set eyes on their lodgers. When the two sleeping chambers were clad in their white adornments, Nell fancied they looked too cold and colourless, so she fetched some old-fashioned vases of blue china from her mother's store closet, and filled them with roses and lilies, overshadowed by graceful branches of crimson fuchsias and tufts of sword grass. She placed one upon each toilet-table, and heaved a sigh to see how pure and sweet and clean the rooms looked, like an unstained conscience in the bosom of a child.

‘Nell! Nell!’ called her mother, from the parlour, ‘open the side-door, there’s a good lass. There’s one of the Hall gardeners bringing over the gentlemen’s luggage.’

Nell did as she was desired, and encountered a man with some portmanteaus, and bags and plaids in a wheelbarrow standing outside the door.

‘These are the things, miss, of the gents as is to sleep here,’ he said.

‘All right. Bring them in,’ was the reply.

The man brought the articles in, one by one, on his shoulders, and heaped them all down in the first room.

‘But stay!’ exclaimed Nell, ‘some must go in the other room. What are the gentlemen’s names?’

‘Sure, I don’t know, miss. All I was told was to bring the luggage over here.’

Nell examined the portmanteaus first. On one were the initials M. L., on the other J. S. P. One bag had M. L. on

it, the other was blank. The two bundles of plaids and umbrellas were not addressed at all.

‘Take that portmanteau and that bag,’ said Nell, intimating the two marked M. L. ‘into the next room, and leave the others here. The gentlemen can sort their own plaids when they come.’

The man did as she told him, and withdrew, as Mrs Llewellyn came bustling into the room to see if ‘the luggage betokened wealth or not.

‘Nice portmantles, ain’t they, Nell?’ she remarked, as she examined the locks and leather. ‘Lor’! what a lot of money young gentlemen do spend on themselves. M. L. I fancy I’ve seen him before. I think that must be Mr Martin Lennox, who was down the year before last. Such a nice, free-spoken young man, and will be an earl some day they told me. J. S. P.,’ she went on, looking at the other portmanteau, ‘I’ve never seen that before. I wonder what it stands for — J. S. P.’

‘What letters did you say?’ asked Nell curiously.

‘J. S. P., my dear. John something, I suppose. However, it don’t matter to us, so long as they don’t make too much noise when they come home at night. There was one gentleman we had once who was dreadful. He wasn’t content with singing all sorts of songs as soon as he got into his room, but he must go for dancing, and he used to make such a row and keep it up so late, that at last father and I could stand it no longer, and were obliged to speak to Sir Archibald. There was no rest for anyone, and when you have to be up at five o’clock, that’s no joke. So Sir Archibald was very good about it, and sent us a quieter gentleman instead.

But Nell had heard nothing of her mother’s discourse. She was kneeling down by the portmanteau marked J. S. P., and examining it all over.

‘What do you see there, my lass?’ said Mrs Llewellyn. ‘What’s the matter with it? Anything gone wrong?’

‘No, mother, nothing — nothing,’ replied the girl, as she rose to her feet again.

She was wondering what there was in the stranger’s portmanteau that seemed so familiar to her — where she could have seen it before — for what name the initials J. S. P. stood? The intermediate letter prevented her grasping the truth at once. She had never associated it with the other two. But something about the luggage seemed to bring an old memory with it, and made her feel uneasy. Could it possibly belong to someone whom she had met in Grosvenor Square? or at Thistlemer? — anyone who might recognise her as having been in Lord Ilfracombe’s household? The thought made her turn cold with apprehension.

‘Both these bundles of shawls can’t belong to one gentleman, Nell,’ said her mother presently. ‘Come and take one into the other room. Ay, but that’s a beauty. And what a pretty plaid, too — green and orange and blue. Wouldn’t I

like just such another to keep my feet warm when father drives me to market at Newport. Carry it carefully, lass. Don't let the straps get loose, or maybe the gentleman will be annoyed.'

But Nell had already let the plaid of green and orange and blue fall to the ground. She recognised it now; she recognised the initials also. They both belonged to Mr John Portland. The thought made her head whirl. She sat down on the floor to recover herself.

'Eh, Nell, my lass, but you're faint,' cried her mother. 'Don't sit on the bed, child, for mercy's sake. You'll ruin the look of the sheets; but get into the parlour as quick as you can. Why, what ails you? You were looking ever so well this morning.'

'Yes, mother, and I'm all right now,' said Nell, as she made an effort to raise herself. 'The day's warm, you know, and I'm only a little tired. I'll be better when I've had my dinner. I don't think there's anything more to be done to the rooms now, so I'll go and look after my own,'

and so she escaped to the shelter of her bedroom. But when she had time to consider the scare she had received, she was ready to call herself a fool for having been frightened so easily.

‘The initials are certainly his,’ she thought, ‘and I’m almost sure he had a plaid something like that one; but, after all, I cannot be certain, and the initials J. P. might fit half a hundred names — John Platt, or James Philpott, or Joseph Plowden. It is silly of me to make sure they belong to Mr Portland until I have better proof. What should he be doing here in Usk? I never heard him mention the place, nor the name of Sir Archibald. I saw so much of him, they would have been sure to crop up some time or other. Oh, I have been frightening myself with a bogey. I am sure I have. How weak my nerves must have become. I was never like this in the old days,’ and Nell heaved a deep sigh as she spoke. Still, as the day drew to a close, and the owners of the portmanteaus

might be expected to arrive at any moment to dress for dinner, she grew so nervous she could not stay in the house. The first person she encountered outside it was Hugh Owen, come to see if she would go for a country walk with him.

‘No,’ said Nell decidedly; ‘I can’t walk to-night. Mother wants me, and I have work to do indoors.’

‘Have you heard that all the company’s arrived at the Hall?’ demanded Hugh; ‘six carriages full, the gardener told me, and as many more expected to-morrow.’

‘Of course I know it,’ replied the girl petulantly; ‘we’ve two of them coming to sleep at the farm to-night. Do you know who they are?’

‘No, I heard no names, except those of Sir Archibald and Lady Bowmant. What is it that is keeping you indoors, Nell?’ asked Hugh.

‘Nothing that concerns you,’ she answered.

He looked surprised at her manner, but did not notice it openly.

‘I thought, if it wouldn’t take you long, you might come out a little later. A walk would do you good. You are looking very pale.’

‘No, I shall not go out this evening,’ she replied. ‘I’m tired, and want to be quiet and by myself.’

‘That means I’m to go then, dear,’ he said wistfully.

‘That’s as you please, Hugh. Mother’s indoors, and always glad to see you, you know that without my telling you, but I’m too busy to have any more time to spare. Good-night.’

She held out her hand to him in token of farewell, and he was fain to accept it and take his leave of her. But, intuitively, he felt more upset than the occasion demanded. He walked on further towards a neighbouring village, and did not return till an hour later. Then he distinguished in the gloaming a white dress cross the road, and go

towards the Hall by way of the fields. Hugh felt sure that the dress belonged to Nell, and yet she had told him she should not leave the farm that night. And what should she want up at the Hall, too, just as the family had returned to it, when she never went near Mrs Hody for weeks together when the house was empty. Hugh puzzled over this enigma for a long time without coming to a satisfactory solution, but he turned into Panty-cuckoo Farm just to see if his suspicion was correct. Meanwhile Nell was creeping up to the Hall by a back way to gain an audience of old Mrs Hody while the family was at dinner. She felt she must know the best, or the worst, before she slept that night.

‘Mrs Hody,’ she said, as she burst in upon that worthy, making a comfortable tea off all the tit-bits that came down from her master’s table, ‘mother sent me up to ask you if the gentlemen will take tea or coffee in the morning.’

‘Lor’! my dear, neither I should say. What will they want with troubling your mother about such things. If they’ve been used to it, her ladyship will order me to send it down for them from the Hall. I wonder whatever put such an idea into her head.’

‘Oh, she thought it best to make sure,’ replied the girl, ‘and please, what are their names?’

‘The gentlemen’s names? Why, one is the Honourable Mr Lennox, and the other is a Mr Portland.’

‘Portland?’ exclaimed Nell. ‘Are you sure? *Portland?*’

‘Yes, my girl, I’m quite sure. Mr John Portland, though I’ve never seen him at the Hall before. He comes from London, I believe. Sir Archibald’s always picking up strangers, and bringing them here to eat their heads off at his expense. Well, some folks have queer notions of pleasure. Haven’t they? Oh, you’re off. Well, give my respects to your mother, and tell her to mind and

keep all her spare cream and chickens for the Hall, for I'll want everything she can send me.'

'Yes, yes, I will tell her,' replied Nell, in a muffled voice, as she turned away repeating in her inmost heart,—'What *shall* I do? What *shall* I do?'

As she walked into the farm parlour, she encountered Hugh Owen, who looked at her through and through.

'Well my lass,' began Mrs Llewellyn, 'here's Hugh waiting for you, you see, so I'm glad you're come. He's been main patient, sitting here for the best part of an hour.'

'Well, good-night,' said Nell, making for the door that led to her chamber.

'Why, won't you stop and talk to him a bit now you have come?' remonstrated her mother.

'I have already told Hugh that I have no time for talking to him to-night,' replied Nell, without arresting her footsteps.

'And you told me, also, that you were

not going to leave the farm to-night, Nell,' said the young man, with the least bit of reproach in his tone.

She turned round on him with unnecessary fierceness.

'And what is it to you if I do or not? Are you my keeper? Am I obliged to account to you for my actions? My father and mother are the only people who have any right to find fault with me, or to regulate my goings-out or comings-in, and I do not hold myself responsible to anyone else. You are taking too much upon yourself, Hugh. For the future, I shall refuse to tell you anything.'

And she flew upstairs, leaving both her mother and Hugh Owen in a state of consternation at such an unusual exhibition of temper on her part.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHRISTMAS was over; the Countess Dowager and the Ladies Devenish had taken their departure from Thistlemere; the weather was inclement, and a great deal of time had to be spent indoors; which made Nora often wish that she and her husband were alone. One day she expressed something of the kind to him. She said,—

‘I thought people usually kept their country seats for the purposes of retirement, but we have never been alone since we came here.’

Ilfracombe laughed.

‘Why, my darling, what do you call us at the present moment? We couldn’t well be much more alone.’

‘Mr Portland is here,’ replied the countess.

‘Old Jack! You don’t call him anybody, surely? He’s as much at home at Thistlemere as we are. I wish he would live here altogether. I don’t know what I shall do when he *does* go. I shall be lost without my old chum to smoke with and talk to.’

‘I don’t think you need anticipate any such calamity,’ said Nora, with something of her old, sharp manner. ‘Mr Portland does not appear to have the slightest intention of moving.’

‘He *was* thinking of it, though. He had a letter yesterday, which he said obliged him to return to town, but I persuaded him to write instead. It would be awfully dull for me if he went away, just at this time when there is nothing going on.’

‘Complimentary to *me*,’ retorted the young countess, with a shrug.

‘Now, my darling, you know what I mean. You are all the world to me—a part of myself—but you can’t sit up till the small hours playing billiards and smoking cigars with me.’

‘No. I draw the line at cigars, Ilfracombe.’

‘And then, how many rainy and dirty days there are, when you only feel inclined to sit over the fire and toast your pretty little feet. What would become of me then, if Jack were not here to go potting rabbits, or turning the rats out of the barns with the terriers. The country is so frightfully dull at this time of year, you would be bored to death with only me to talk to.’

‘Do you think so, Ilfracombe?’

‘I feel sure of it, and how should we pass the evenings without our whist? Babbage is the only man within hail of us who thinks it worth his while to come over for a game; so if Jack were not good enough to exile himself for the pleasure of our company, we should be obliged to import someone else, who would probably not play half so well.’

Lord and Lady Ilfracombe were riding together at the time of this conversation, walking their horses slowly round the lanes

about Thistlemere, for Nora was not an experienced horsewoman. She had had no opportunity of either riding or driving in Malta, and her husband was employing his leisure by teaching her something of both arts. She was a pupil to be proud of; plucky in the extreme, and only a little reckless and disposed to imagine she could do it all at once, which kept the earl on constant tenter-hooks about her. As he finished speaking to her now, she exclaimed rather impatiently,—

‘Oh, very well, let us say no more about it,’ and struck the spirited little mare she was riding sharply across the neck with her whip.

The animal started and set off suddenly at a hard gallop, nearly unseating her rider by the rapidity of her action. The earl followed, in an access of alarm until he saw that the mare had settled down into a moderate canter again.

‘Nora, my darling!’ he exclaimed, as he came up with her, ‘you mustn’t do that. Leila won’t stand it. She will throw

you some day to a dead certainty. You gave me a pretty fright, I can tell you. What should I do if you were thrown.'

'Pick me up again, I hope,' replied the countess, laughing, as if it were an excellent joke.

'Yes, but with a broken limb perhaps, and fancy what my remorse would be if that happened. I should never forgive myself for having mounted you on the beast. But she really is a good-tempered thing if you know how to take her.'

'Just like her mistress,' said Nora, smiling. 'But, seriously, Ilfracombe, I will be more careful. I don't want to break my leg before I am presented at Court.'

'Nor after it, I hope, my darling. But walk Leila now, there's a good child, and let her simmer down a little. You've made me feel just as I do when I think I've missed the odd trick.'

'I believe you are fonder of playing cards than anything, Ilfracombe,' said Nora slowly.

'I am—except you. But they are so

jolly—there's so much excitement about cards. They keep a man alive.'

'But, Ilfracombe, why need we always play for such high stakes? Do you know I lost thirty pounds at "Sandown" yesterday evening?'

'Did you, dearest? Are you cleaned out? I will let you have some more as soon as we reach home.'

'No, it is not that. It would not signify once in a way perhaps, but it is the same thing every night. It seems an awful waste of money.'

'Not if you enjoy it, dear. We must pay for our whistle, you know. Cards would be no fun without the stakes. And somebody must lose.'

'Yes, and somebody must win. Only, as it happens, it is always the same somebody, which doesn't seem fair.'

'Nora, what do you mean?'

'Just what I say, Ilfracombe. I lose every night; so do you; so does Lord Babbage; and the only person who wins is Mr Portland. All the money seems to go into his pocket.'

‘Oh, Nora, my darling, this is not fair of you. You are prejudiced against my old chum—I have seen that from the beginning—but to say that dear old Jack wins all the stakes, night after night, is as good as saying—oh, I am sure you cannot mean it—you cannot think of the meaning of what you say.’

‘My dear Ilfracombe, there is no meaning about it. I am only speaking the plain truth. I’ve seen it for a long time. Doubtless, Mr Portland is the best player of the four, and that is the reason, but it has struck me as rather remarkable. And it seems so strange, too, that friends should want, or like to pocket each other’s money. Why can’t we play for the love of the game? It would be quite as interesting, surely.’

‘No, no, child, it wouldn’t. Whoever heard of such a thing as grown men sitting down seriously to play for love?’ cried the earl merrily; ‘that’s only schoolgirl’s games. And I wonder to hear you, Nora, who are such a little

woman of the world, suggesting such a thing. I should have thought you liked staking your money as well as anyone.'

'Perhaps it is because I am a woman of the world that I don't like to see my husband's money wasted. No income, however large, can stand such a strain long. Besides, I know it is not only cards on which you bet with Mr Portland. You go to races with him, and lose a lot of money there. Mr Castelton told me so!'

'It is not true, Nora, and Castelton had better mind his own business. Everybody must lose occasionally; but I always follow Jack's lead, and he's as safe as the church clock. And, after all, my dear girl, I'd as soon the tin went into old Jack's pocket as my own. He's awfully hard up sometimes, and if one can't share some of one's good things with one's best friend, I don't know what's the use of them.'

'Well, leave a little for me,' cried Nora gaily, and her husband's answer

should have at least satisfied her that she would always be his first care. But she was not satisfied with regard to the nightly games of cards. She watched the players more closely after this conversation than before, and decided within herself that she had been correct, and Jack Portland was by far the heaviest and most frequent winner. One day, when they were alone together, she could not help congratulating him, in a sarcastic manner, on his continual run of good luck. He guessed at her meaning in a minute.

‘Do you mean to infer that I cheat?’ he asked her abruptly.

Then Nora felt a little ashamed of herself and did not know what to reply.

‘Oh, no, of course not. How could you think of such a thing? Only it is evident that you are a far better player than Lord Babbage or Ilfracombe, and, to my mind, the odds are very much against them. As for poor me, you have ruined me already. I have lost all

my pin-money for the next three months.'

'Nonsense!' he said rudely (Mr Portland could be exceedingly rude to her when they were alone), 'you know you can get as much money out of Ilfracombe as you can possibly want. The man is infatuated with you. More fool he. But he'll find out how much your love is worth some day.'

'Perhaps you intend to enlighten him?' said her ladyship.

She could not resist letting fly her little shafts at him, whatever the consequences might be.

'Perhaps I do, if you egg me on to it,' was Mr Portland's reply. 'But, seriously, my lady, don't you attempt to come between his lordship and myself, or you may rue the day you did it. I am a *vaurien*—adventurer—swindler—what you like. I'm not afraid of you or your tongue, because I hold the trump card and should have no hesitation in playing it. But my income, though tolerably expansive, is a

fluctuating one, and I am compelled to eke it out as best I can. I amuse my friends, and I live chiefly at their expense. Lord Ilfracombe is, luckily for me, one of my best and greatest of chums, so I cling to him like a double-sweet pea. Until you came in the way there has never been a suspicion cast on the honour of my intentions—the disinterestedness of my friendship. See that you don't do it, that's all.'

'And what if I did?' asked Nora, defiantly, with her head well up in the air.

Mr Portland moved a few steps closer to her.

'I would deliver those letters of yours into Ilfracombe's hands within the hour,' he said, between his teeth.

Nora quailed before his glance, but her voice was steady as she replied,—

'You would not. You *dare* not. You would ruin yourself for ever, and be pointed at in Society as a scoundrel and a black-mailer.'

'Never mind what the world would say of me. Think only of what it would say of *you*.'

‘It could not say anything,’ she retorted, with the boldness of despair; ‘there would be nothing for it to say. There is no harm in those letters. I should not mind if my husband read them to-morrow.’

‘Wouldn’t you?’ said Jack Portland, with open eyes. ‘Then I’ll show them to him before he is twelve hours older.’

‘No, no,’ said Nora quickly, ‘you would not do so mean an act, surely. You must have some instincts of a gentleman left in you. Remember under what circumstances they were written, and that I thought at the time I loved you.’

‘I suppose you did,’ replied Mr Portland; ‘but they are delicious reading all the same. I read passages from them once to a select party of my men friends, and they said they would never have guessed they were the productions of a young lady. They voted they would have been warm even from a barmaid.’

‘You did not! You cannot have been such a blackguard!’ exclaimed Lady Ilfra-

combe so shrilly, that he laid his hand upon her arms to caution her she might be overheard. 'You have promised to give me those letters back, over and over again, and you have not kept your word. I will wait no longer, but have them at once. I insist upon it. Do you hear me? I will stand this treatment from you no longer.'

'Oh, I hear, fast enough, and I'm very much afraid that everybody else in the house, including Lord Ilfracombe, will hear also, if your ladyship is not a little more guarded.'

'But you promised — you *promised*,' she continued vehemently, 'and now you threaten to break your promise. You are no gentleman, Mr Portland. The lowest man on earth would degrade himself by such vile conduct.'

'I daresay,' he answered coolly; 'perhaps he would. But your behaviour is enough to make a saint forget his natural instincts. You remind me that I promised to return your letters. I know I did,

and if you had treated me decently since coming here, I might have kept my promise. But I won't give them to you now. I will only sell them.'

'What can you possibly mean?' exclaimed the countess. 'Am I to buy back my own letters? Well, I will. What price do you ask for them?'

She was standing in the oriel window of the drawing-room, most becomingly dressed in a gown of brown velvet, that seemed to match her eyes and set off the pearly whiteness of her skin, and as she put the above question she curled her upper lip and threw such an air of disdain into her expression that she looked more charming than usual.

'Don't look like that,' said Portland, coming nearer to her, 'or you will aggravate me to kiss you.'

The indignant blood rushed in a flood of crimson to Nora's face and forehead, until it nearly forced tears from her eyes.

'How dare you! How dare you!' she panted, as she retreated as far as she could from him.

‘How dare I?’ he repeated. ‘That wasn’t the way your ladyship used to receive the same proposition when we sat together under the shade of the orange-trees in Malta a couple of years ago. Was it now?’

‘I do not know. I cannot remember. I only know that your presence now is hateful to me. What sum do you require for those letters? If it was half our fortune I would give it you, sooner than be subjected to further insult. Tell me how much at once. I will sell all my jewels if I cannot raise the money otherwise!’

‘No, no, I’m not going to press you quite so hard as all that, Nora. I don’t want your jewels, my dear,’ replied Jack Portland, with offensive familiarity. ‘My price is—your silence.’

‘Silence about what? Do you imagine I am likely to talk about a matter which I would expunge with my life-blood if I could.’

‘You mistake me. By your silence, I

mean that you must no longer interfere, as you seem inclined to do, between your husband and myself. You must not try to separate us in any way; not in our friendship, nor our pursuits, nor our sports; we like to play cards together—'

'*You* like, you mean,' she interposed sarcastically.

'*Plait-il,*' acquiesced Jack Portland, with an expressive shrug; 'at anyrate, we have been used to play cards and attend races and generally enjoy ourselves as *bons camarades*, and your ladyship will be good enough not to attempt to put an end to these things, not to remark in that delicately sarcastic way of yours that it is always your humble servant who appears to win. Do I make myself perfectly understood?'

'Perfectly,' said Nora, 'and if I consent to this, what then?'

'Why, that packet of charming letters—twenty-five in all, if I remember rightly—which have afforded me so much con-

solation under our cruel separation, and which would prove, I feel sure, such very interesting reading for Lord Ilfracombe, shall remain in my custody, safe from all prying eyes except mine.'

'But you promised to return them to me,' argued Nora, and then with the greatness of the stake at issue before her eyes, and forgetting everything but that she was at the mercy of the man before her, the unhappy girl condescended to entreaty. 'Oh, Mr Portland—Jack,' she stammered, 'for God's sake—for the sake of the past, give me back those letters.'

'How nice it is to hear you call me "Jack," said Mr Portland, gazing boldly at her. 'It almost reconciles me to the great loss I experienced in you. When you call me "Jack" I feel as if I could refuse you nothing.'

'Then will you give them to me?'

'Certainly, *ma chère*, haven't I said so a dozen times? Only you must positively wait until I return to town. You women are so terribly unreasonable.

And you, for your part, promise never to interfere between my old friend Ilfracombe and myself, and sometimes, to call me "Jack" for the sake of the past.'

Lady Ilfracombe was shivering now as if she had received a cold-water douche. She realised what being in the power of this man meant—that he would torture her, as a cat tortures a mouse, until he had bent her in every way to do his will.

'I promise,' she said in a low voice; 'but if you gentlemen will play for such high stakes, you must not expect me to join your game. You would ruin me in no time; as it is, I am regularly "cleaned out."'

'I would much rather you did *not* join it,' replied Mr Portland seriously. 'Ladies are seldom any good at whist, and I would rather play dummy any day. I suppose Ilfracombe will take you to Newmarket and Epsom with him, but you will understand nothing of the races,

so I make no objection to that. By the way, have you yet mentioned this matter of our playing high to him?

‘I told him I thought the stakes were high for a private game, but he contradicted me, and said it was no fun playing except for money.’

‘I should think not. However, don’t speak to him of such a thing again please. Besides, it is ridiculous. He has an ample fortune, and can afford to do as he pleases. I can’t see myself why you sit in the card-room in the evenings, the drawing-room is the proper place for a lady.’

‘You would like to separate me from my husband altogether, I daresay,’ cried Nora heatedly.

‘By no manner of means. You quite mistake my meaning. Such a proceeding would distress me beyond measure. But I don’t intend to give up any of the privileges which I enjoyed from Ilfracombe’s intimacy before his marriage for you. Had he married anybody else, it

might have been different, but not for *you*. It would be too bad to ask me to give up both my lady-love and my friend at one stroke. You will acknowledge the justice of that yourself, won't you?'

'Don't ask me, I don't know anything,' replied the Countess, wearily, as she moved away, 'You have come into my life again to make it miserable, and if you have no honour nor generosity there is nothing left that I can see to appeal to.' And in her heart Nora added, 'And if I could stretch you dead at my feet this moment, I would do it without a single pang.'

She was more cautious in what she said to the earl, however, after that, and occasionally he rallied her on having got over her objection to too high play. Once when they were quite alone, she ventured to answer him.

'No, Ilfracombe, I cannot say that you are right. You must have observed that I seldom stay in the room now

when you are playing, I do not approve of such high stakes, but I do not like to interfere with your enjoyment, or to appear to know better than yourself. But you won't tell Mr Portland I said so,' she added in a wistful tone. Lord Ilfracombe looked surprised.

'Tell Jack, my darling? Why, of course not. All that passes between you and me is sacred. I don't think you've been looking quite up to the mark lately, Nora. I'm afraid you must find Thistlemere rather dull. I shall be glad when the time comes for us to go up to town. Then we'll see some life together, won't we?'

And Nora smiled faintly, and answered 'Yes.'

CHAPTER IX.

THE Derby was run that year in the last week of May. The young Countess of Ilfracombe had already been presented at Court under the auspices of her mother-in-law. She had attended more than one Royal function since; she had seen all that there was worth seeing in town, and she had entertained largely at her own house in Grosvenor Square. She had been fairly launched on Society in fact, and, unlike most heroines, it had not disappointed her. Everything was new and fresh to her; everything was delightful. This was what she had longed for and dreamed of in far-off Malta, and her letters home were full of the pleasure she was experiencing and the

honours that were paid to her. Nora felt happier, too, and more at her ease in the company of her mother-in-law and the Ladies Devenish, and away from the close, every-day companionship of Mr Portland, who had at last returned to his own chambers in the Albany. She fluttered about from milliner to milliner, theatre to theatre, like a huge butterfly; all fashion, delicate tints, smiles and excitement. Ilfracombe, unlike his usual taste, seemed delighted to be her cavalier on all occasions. The truth is, he was thankful to get out of the house. Fond as he undoubtedly was of his wife, the atmosphere of Grosvenor Square depressed him. He could not enter a single room without being painfully reminded of Nell Llewellyn and her devoted love for him. It had been a very real love between these two. On her side the most unselfish, adoring, humble passion—on his, a very appreciative acknowledgment of her single-eyed affection, mingled with a great admiration of her beauty. *His*

love for her, however, had always been mixed with a certain amount of shame and uncertainty, because he knew it was impossible it could go on for ever, and he dreaded the moment when it would become imperative to tell her so. Nell had ended it all for herself, however, and but too abruptly, and now he could not sit in the rooms where they had for so long sat together, and which she had so confidently regarded as her own without finding his thoughts very much drawn her way, even though his lawful wife was by his side. He thought of the time when Nell first came to his house, a tall, slender girl, with a complexion like a wild rose, and beautiful startled hazel eyes, moist with the dews of youth. How frightened she was when he first whispered his love into her ear—how passionately remorseful when he had led her astray — how wonderfully grateful and reverential when he told her she should thenceforth reign the mistress of his heart. He looked back over the

years she had managed his household for him, and could not remember one instance of her losing her temper with him—that passionate, indomitable temper, which was so quickly roused by others. How often he had wished, almost decided to make her his wife, if only for the devoted love she bore him, but had been afraid on consideration of the sneers and disapproval of the world, and so had dismissed the idea from his mind. And now — well, of course, he would not change his Nora for any woman. She was a glory to him, whilst poor Nell would only have been a disgrace. Still he wished from the bottom of his heart that she had been more reasonable, and gone home quietly to her friends, and, by-and-by, married some man in her own station of life, who would have considered the settlement he wished to make on her a little fortune. Lord Ilfracombe wondered, by the way, who *were* Nell's friends, and where she came from. She had never mentioned her old home to him.

Did they know of her sad death, he wondered; or of the circumstances that led to it? He thought not. She was not the sort of woman to betray the man she loved even in death. She would have carried her secret with her to the grave. It was done, and it could not be undone, he would tell himself, but the thought made the house very distasteful to him. He became nervous, even timid. He did not care to enter his private rooms at dusk, and would fancy he heard a sigh, or caught sight of a shadowy form flitting by him in the gloaming. One day he called his wife 'Nell.' It was a fearful mistake, and his face grew crimson as he discovered it; but Nora was wonderfully calm under the little *désagrément*.

'Was that Miss Llewellyn's name, Ilfracombe?' she asked archly.

'Oh, my love, forgive me!' cried the earl. 'What can I have been thinking of? It was the mere force of habit. You know she was here with

me, and it is the first time I have been in the house since.'

'Did you think I should be angry?' asked Nora, looking back at him over her shoulder. 'Surely it is the most natural thing in the world that you should think of the poor girl. You would be a brute if you didn't; but don't get melancholy over it, dear boy. Come into the Park with me, or let us go down the river together. I won't leave you moping here by yourself.'

And it was such things that made Lord Ilfracombe say, and rightly, that he had gained a wife in a thousand. He was anxious that she should accompany him to the Derby, for two reasons — anxious that she should see the biggest race of the year, which, of course, she had never yet had an opportunity of doing; and anxious to let the racing world see what a charming countess he had secured. The Dowager Lady Ilfracombe was very much against the idea, and the Ladies Devenish

said it was decidedly vulgar and not a all *comme il faut*.

‘If Ilfracombe had taken you to Ascot, or Goodwood, it would have been different, but the Derby! Why, hardly any ladies go there. There is always such a vulgar crowd, and, coming back by the road, you are bound to be insulted.’

‘Do you think so?’ said Nora. ‘I should like to see the man who would dare to insult me in Ilfracombe’s presence.’

‘But you don’t know anything about it,’ replied Lady Blanche. ‘The roughs who frequent the Derby course make no difference between an earl and anybody else. They don’t know one when they see him, and the awful people you will see on the race-course, gipsies—and nigger minstrels, and low creatures of all sorts.’

‘Have you ever been there yourself?’ inquired Nora.

‘I should hope not, indeed. I would

not think of such a thing. It is no place for ladies. I can't imagine what Ilfracombe can be thinking of to let you go.'

'Well, I suppose he knows better than either of us, Blanche, and it was his own proposal. We are going down—a large party on our drag. Lady Moberly and the Duchess of Downshire are going with us, so I shall offend the proprieties in good company.'

'Oh, if the duchess is going with you, it makes a difference of course. No one has ever said a word against the duchess, and she is at least fifty, so she will give a tone to the whole affair and be a sort of chaperon for you; for you see, Nora, though you *are* a countess, you are rather young.'

'I know that,' retorted Nora; 'but I'm getting the better of it every day.'

'Well, you needn't be flippant, my dear,' replied her sister-in-law with a sniff. 'Rank has its obligations, though you do not appear to think so. There might have

been some excuse for your not knowing it before your marriage, but there is none now.'

'No, I suppose not. All the same I'm going to the Derby this year, if I never go again.'

And off ran Nora to join her husband. The Derby day was for her a complete success. She was dressed becomingly—was in good health and spirits, and in the humour to enjoy all she saw and heard. Lord Ilfracombe's drag, with its team of perfectly-matched chesnuts, was one of the handsomest in the Four-in-hand Club, and had always attracted particular attention when he turned out for the annual Park display. Their party consisted of the Duchess of Downshire, Lord and Lady Moberly, Miss Chetwynd, one of that season's beauties, and several bachelors, amongst whom was Mr Jack Portland—the only drawback to Nora's enjoyment. But she was seated behind her husband and the duchess, who occupied the box-seat, and he was at the back of the

coach, so that during the journey they did not exchange a word with one another. As soon as they arrived on the race-course, and the horses had been taken out of the shafts, the servants spread their luncheon, and they began to have a merry time of it. Presently Jack Portland's voice was heard exclaiming, as he looked at someone through his field-glass,—

‘By George! if that isn't Sir Archibald Bowmant, my Usk friend, and his wife. I told you, Ilfracombe, didn't I, that I'm going to spend a few weeks with them next month. They're the best fellows in the world. Awful fun! and don't the old boy know a card when he sees it.’

‘Friends of yours, Jack?’ said Ilfracombe in his hospitable way. ‘Ask them to come here and lunch with us, old boy, if they're not better engaged.’

‘Shall I? Have I *your* permission, Lady Ilfracombe?’ asked Mr Portland, looking at Nora.

‘Need you ask the question, Mr Portland,’ she replied without glancing his

way. 'If you have my husband's leave, you have mine.'

'Thanks,' said Mr Portland as he descended from the coach. 'They may be with another party; but I'll just ask. I'm sure you'll like them. Lady Bowmant is just your style.'

In a few minutes he returned with his friends, and introduced them to Lord and Lady Ilfracombe. Sir Archibald was a stout, florid, middle-aged man, with a jolly, good-tempered countenance, and weak, watery, blue eyes. His wife, to whom he had not been married a twelvemonth, was many years his junior, perhaps not more than five-and-twenty, and was as good a specimen of a fast young woman who just contrives not to step over the rubicon as could be found anywhere. She had been a nobody, and her head was completely turned by having become the wife of a baronet. She was decidedly pretty, with a countrified style of beauty, and she was fashionably but not well dressed. Her manner was effusive, and her voice

loud, but she was lively, sparkling and amusing. Lady Ilfracombe, though indisposed to accord her a hearty welcome just because she had been introduced by Jack Portland, could not help thawing under her lively manner, and before long they were all on the most excellent terms.

‘How good of you to ask us to luncheon, Lady Ilfracombe!’ exclaimed the new comer. ‘I am sure I shall never forget it. I do so admire anything like cordiality. You meet with so little of it in this country. We Englishwomen are horribly stiff as a rule, are we not? Sir Archibald and I were admiring your drag so much. We were on the course when you drove up, just making our way to the Grand Stand. It is quite a wonder we are here. We never meant to come, but I have never seen the Derby run, and Sir Archibald thought I should not go back to Wales without doing so. We drove down but put up at the hotel. Are we not ignoramuses? I was just desparing of pushing

our way through this crowd when Jack spied us out, and landed us, through your goodness, in this haven of peace.'

'You have known Mr Portland a long time then, I suppose?' remarked Nora.

'Why? Because I called him "Jack?" Oh, everyone calls him "Jack," don't they? He's a regular lady's man, is Mr Portland, and a great favourite with my husband. He is coming to stay with us in Usk next month.'

'So he told us just now.'

'Yes, I am quite looking forward to it. He is such a delightful companion in the country. Do you like the country, Lady Ilfracombe? Are you fond of horses?'

'I am very fond of horses,' replied Nora, smiling; 'but if your question means, Do you ride well? I must tell you that I never mounted a horse till after my marriage, and so I am still a learner.'

'Oh, you'll be proficient in no time!' exclaimed Lady Bowmant. 'Isn't it delightful? I adore riding and driving, and

everything connected with horses. Don't I, Sir Archibald?'

'You do, my dear,' said the jolly baronet. 'That is, if adoring means riding them to death, and driving over half my tenantry,' and he roared as if his wife's feats of skill were the funniest things in the world.

'Now, don't tell tales out of school, Sir Archibald,' cried the lady. 'You know when I hunted last season that there wasn't a woman in the field who could keep anywhere near me. And didn't I carry off three brushes? And didn't the master of the fox-hounds say I was the pluckiest horsewoman he had ever seen?'

'Oh, yes, Dolly; no one denies your pluck, my dear. Only I wish you didn't drive your tandem over the children so often. The pounds I had to pay last year for mending babies and recouping the mothers passes belief.'

'Don't you believe him, Lady Ilfracombe,' said his wife with a saucy nod. 'The old man's getting in his second dotage and doesn't know half he says.'

At this fresh sally Sir Archibald roared again until he nearly choked himself over his lobster salad and champagne.

The races were now beginning in good earnest, but Nora did not take half so much interest in them as she did in the lively conversation of her new acquaintance, who out-talked the duchess and Lady Moberly and all the other ladies put together. She was very keen on the racing though, and explained a great deal to Nora which she could not have understood without her. The gentlemen of the party had left the drag as soon as the work of the day began, and found their way to the betting-ring.

‘Now, I hope my old man won’t pop too much on Caliban!’ exclaimed Lady Bowmant a little anxiously. ‘For it looks to me as if he had been a bit over-trained. I heard Jack recommending him to put a monkey on him; but though Jack knows a thing or two I don’t always take his advice in racing matters. I expect its six for himself and half-a-dozen for his friends like most of them, eh?’

‘I know so little of these things,’ replied Lady Ilfracombe. ‘Is the Derby a great race for betting on?’

The other turned and looked at her with surprise.

‘Is the Derby a race for betting on?’ she repeated. ‘My dear Lady Ilfracombe, men lose fortunes over it. They’re mad, I tell them, perfectly mad. No one likes spending money more than I do; but to throw it away by the thousand! Why, it spells ruin for the majority, that’s all.’

‘I hope Ilfracombe will not be reckless,’ said Nora anxiously. ‘I sometimes think he is a little disposed to be so over cards and those sorts of games.’

‘If he’s with Jack Portland, he’s bound to “go the pace,”’ returned Lady Bowmant, laughing. ‘Upon my word, I sometimes think that man’s mad. Have you ever seen him at baccarat, Lady Ilfracombe?’

‘Who? What?’ said Nora, who was vainly trying to follow her husband’s movements. ‘Mr Portland? No.’

‘It’s a caution,’ said her companion. ‘I’ve had to positively drag Sir Archibald away from him sometimes, for fear he should get up from the table without a halfpenny. But it’s a lovely game. So much excitement. We are at it at Usk Hall sometimes till four in the morning. We are terrible gamblers up there.’

‘See!’ cried the duchess, standing up in the drag; ‘they’re off!’

After which they spent a couple of very fatiguing hours watching the various races, and jotting down the first, second and third winners on their cards, during which time the men did not come near them, so occupied were they by the business of the betting-ring and the excitement provided for them there. When it was at last all over, and their party returned to the drag, Nora observed that Ilfracombe was looking very flushed, and talking very fast, a sufficiently unusual circumstance with him to attract her notice. Mr Portland, on the contrary, seemed to take things much more

coolly ; whilst the baronet had lost some of his hilariousness, and Lord Moberly was congratulating himself that he had not been persuaded to back the favourite.

‘Well, and how have you all fared?’ cried the duchess gaily, as they came within hailing distance.

‘Sir Archibald, I feel certain you have been making a fool of yourself!’ exclaimed his wife. ‘I can see it in the set of your tie. Very well. Back you go to Usk to-morrow, and you’ll have to put up with mutton and potatoes till we’ve recouped ourselves. Now, what have you lost? Out with it!’

‘Nonsense, Dolly, nonsense,’ replied the baronet, as he tried to evade her scrutiny. ‘A mere trifle, I assure you ; not worth thinking about. When did you ever know me make a fool of myself over races?’

‘Scores of times,’ replied her ladyship decidedly, as she whispered in his ear.

Nora did not ask any questions, nor make any remarks, but she gazed at her

husband in a wistful way as if she would read from his features whether he had been lucky or otherwise. Ilfracombe did not voluntarily look her way; but after a while he felt the magnetism of her glance, and raised his eyes to hers. The silent anxiety he read in them seemed to annoy him. He frowned slightly, and affecting unusual hilarity, climbed to his seat and seized the reins.

‘Now for a good scamper back to town!’ he exclaimed. ‘We must not let the riff-raff get ahead of us, or we shall be smothered in dust. Are you tired, darling?’ he continued over his shoulder to his wife; ‘or would you like to go to the Oaks on Friday? What do you think of our national race-course and our national game?’

‘I have been very much amused. I liked it very much,’ answered Nora in a conventional manner; but the tone of her voice did not convey much satisfaction. But as Ilfracombe and she were dressing for a big dinner-party, to which they were

engaged that evening, she crept to his side and asked him shyly,—

‘Did you lose much to-day, Ilfracombe? I am sure you lost, or you would have told me the amount of your winnings. But was it *very* much?’

‘I was pretty hard hit over “The Cardinal,”’ he answered; ‘but nothing to howl over.’

‘Why did you take Mr Portland’s advice?’ she said. ‘He always makes you lose.’

‘Not at all,’ replied her husband; ‘Jack is the best adviser I have. Everyone must lose at times. It’s absurd to suppose you can always win.’

‘Then why doesn’t he lose also?’ said Nora boldly. ‘Why doesn’t he give you the same advice he follows himself?’

‘My darling child, you know nothing of such matters, and I don’t want you to do so. They concern men only. And look here, Nora—I don’t want to say anything unkind; but I would rather you did not interfere with my winnings or my

losings. They are essentially my own affair. Trust me to take care of myself. And now, if you are ready, we had better go.'

After which Nora was sharp enough to see that she would only make a bad matter worse by attempting to set Ilfracombe against Jack Portland, and that her only plan was to watch and wait, until the time came when she might be able to influence her husband openly.

He loved her, but he was too easily led by a stronger mind than his own, and he was too loyal to believe that his intimate friend, who shared all his good things at his pleasure, could plot to aggrandise himself at his expense.

She had brought it on herself, Nora said inwardly, and she must bear the penalty as best she might.

A few days after the Derby, Sir Archibald and Lady Bowmant called upon her, and she returned their visit. She thought Lady Bowmant very clever and amusing, but she little dreamt the ac-

quaintanceship would lead to a close and sudden intimacy. She was astonished, therefore, one morning, by her husband telling her that he had met the baronet at his club the night before, and that he had extended a most cordial invitation for them to go down to Usk Hall during the time that Jack Portland was to be there.

‘To Usk Hall?’ said Nora, with surprise. ‘But, Ilfracombe, we do not know the Bowmants sufficiently well to go and stay with them. I have only seen her three times in all.’

‘What does that signify?’ replied her husband. ‘They’re awfully jolly people; you said so yourself, and Jack says they keep it up royally at Usk Hall. The Prince of Huhm-Hessetal is to be there, and no end of nice people. You’ll receive a proper invitation from Lady Bowmant to-morrow or next day, and I see no reason why we should not accept it.’

‘I thought you had agreed to join your mother’s party at Wiesbaden,’ said the countess dubiously.

‘Oh, hang my mother’s party!’ exclaimed Ilfracombe irritably. ‘A lot of old fogies together. What fun should we get out of that? I only said something about seeing her there, just to quiet her. I never meant to go. Besides, we can go abroad afterwards if you wish it. But neither of us have ever seen Wales—a most beautiful country, and the Bowmants’ is just the sort of house to suit us. Lots of horses for you to ride and drive, and salmon fishing for me; and—well, all I can say is, that I wish to go.’

‘Of course, then, we shall go,’ replied his wife quietly.

But, when the invitation actually arrived, she made one more appeal to the earl to keep her out of the way of Jack Portland.

‘Ilfracombe,’ she said, going to seek him, with the letter from Lady Bowmant in her hand, ‘have you quite made up your mind? Am I really to tell these people that we will go to Usk Hall and stay with them?’

‘Of course. Why not? Haven’t we decided to accept the invitation?’ he demanded.

‘*You* have, I know, but I feel sure it will prove a disappointment to both of us. You will call me silly, but I have such a presentiment that this visit will end in some terrible trouble for us. Is it only fancy, do you think,’ added Nora, with unusual softness in her voice and manner, ‘or may it not be a warning for us not to go?’

‘A warning! Rubbish!’ exclaimed the earl, as he kissed her troubled eyes. ‘Now, my darling, you *shall* go if only to prove what a little goose you are. *A warning!* I know what you’re thinking of. You’re afraid I shall succumb to the charms of the fascinating Lady Bowmant. Well, she is a flirt, there is no doubt of that, and she is setting her cap at me rather hard; but don’t be afraid, little woman. Your husband is not such a fool as he looks, and he means you to go with him to Usk Hall.’

CHAPTER X.

So Lady Ilfracombe gave in with a good grace, and the note of invitation was duly answered and accepted. It was a proof of Nora's growing interest in the earl, that she had quite left off trying to wield her power over him in little things. It was not in her nature ever to sink down into a very submissive wife—a meaningless echo of her husband, water to his wine; but she was learning to yield her own wishes gracefully in deference to his, and in this instance, as we know, she was too much afraid of Jack Portland to press the point. He had told her plainly that if she interfered between him and Lord Ilfracombe, she would do it at her cost, and from what she had heard of the *ménage* at

Usk Hall, both from its owners and himself, she felt pretty sure their invitation had been sent at Mr Portland's instigation, and that he had a purpose in having it sent. He was not satisfied with having fleeced her husband all through the winter, he would drain his pockets still further at the Bowmants; in fact, she had no doubt now that he looked to the earl as the chief means of his subsistence. And till she had found some way of outwitting him—until she had that packet of letters, the contents of which she so much dreaded her husband seeing, in her own hands, Nora said to herself, with a sigh, that she must endure Mr Portland's insolence and chicanery. They had only been asked to the Hall for a week or two, and they intended to limit their visit to a week. If she could only have foreseen what that week would bring forth. It was a notable fact that Jack Portland had never tried to rouse the countess's anger or jealousy by an allusion to Nell Llewellyn and her former influence over the earl. Indeed, he had

not even mentioned her name before Nora. The reason of this was, not because he respected her wifhood or herself, but because the remembrance of Nell was a sore one with him. He had never cared the least bit for Miss Abinger. He had thought her a very jolly sort of girl, with plenty of 'go' in her—a great flirt—very fast—very smart, and slightly verging on the improper. She was a great source of amusement to him whilst he stayed in Malta, and he had encouraged her in all sorts of 'larks,' chiefly for the fun of seeing how far she would go. When their conduct had commenced to give rise to scandal in Valetta, and his sister, Mrs Loveless, had spoken very gravely to him on the subject, he had sought to make the *amende honourable* by proposing for the young lady's hand. But Sir Richard Abinger had rejected his suit with scorn. *He*—an impecunious adventurer, who lived from hand to mouth, and had no settled employment, presume to propose to marry his daughter Nora, and drag her down

with himself—he had never heard of such a piece of impudence in his life before. So Mr Jack Portland, having done the correct thing (as the lady said when she went to church on Sunday and found there was to be no service), made haste out of Malta again, and the place knew him no more. The rest of the story has been told. Both of them had only been playing at love, and neither of them was hurt. Had it not been for those unfortunately bold and unmaidenly letters which remained in Mr Portland's possession, Nora would long ago have forgotten all about the matter.

But there had been something in Nell Llewellyn, fallen woman though she was, that had made a much deeper impression on the heart of Mr Portland, if, indeed, he possessed such an article. He had not proposed to marry her—it was not much in his way to consider marriage a necessary accompaniment to respectability; but, had Nell made marriage a condition of their union, he would have yielded to her wishes

sooner or later. There was something about her grand devotion to Ilfracombe that attracted his worldly nature, that was used to associate with the most mercenary of her sex; and when she blazed out at him in her passionately indignant manner, repudiating with scorn the idea of his advances, he admired her still more. He thought Ilfracombe a fool to have given up the one woman for the other, but he would have been the last man to have told him so. He was not going to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs. And a very disagreeable feeling had been engendered in him by the knowledge of Nell's supposed fate. He did not want to mention her name, nor to think of her after that. It was a painful reminiscence which he did his best to drown in the distractions of cards and wine. Things were in just this condition when they all journeyed up to Usk together, and Mr Portland's portmanteau and plaids were carried over to the rooms at Panty-cuckoo Farm. Nell was like a wild creature after she had

discovered for certain who their owner was. To meet Mr Portland, of all men in the world, would seal her fate. Where could she fly in order to hide herself from him? what do to avoid the contact of his presence? She dared not leave the house for fear of meeting him; she was afraid even to leave her own room lest he should have taken it into his head to explore the dairy or bakehouse. Her mother did not know what had come to her. She grew quite cross at last, and thought it must be the arrival of the grand folks at the Hall that had made her daughter so flighty and useless and forgetful.

‘Just as I want all the help you can give me,’ she grumbled, ‘and it’s little enough use you are to me at the best of times, you get one of your lardy-dardy, high-flier fits on, and go shivering and shaking about the house, as if you expected to meet a ghost in the passage or the cellar. Now, what made you run away in that flighty fashion just now, when you were in the middle of doing

the lodgers' rooms? I went in expecting to find them finished, and there were half the things upset and you nowhere.'

'I thought I heard one of the gentlemen coming across the grass, and so I left the room till he should be gone again.'

'But why, my lass? They won't eat you. They're both as nice-spoken gentlemen as ever I see. And you must have met plenty of gentlefolk up in London town. It isn't as if you were a country-bred girl, and too frightened to open your mouth. However, if you don't like to take charge of the rooms, I'll do it myself. But why won't you go out a bit instead? Here's Hugh been over every evening, and you won't stir for him. I hope you are not carrying on with Hugh for a bit of fun, Nell, for he's a good lad as ever stepped, and a minister into the bargain, and it would be most unbecoming in you. You must go for a walk with him this evening, like a good lass.'

‘Not if I don’t feel inclined,’ replied Nell haughtily. ‘Hugh Owen has no right to look aggrieved if I fancy walking by myself. Men think a deal too much of themselves in my opinion.’

‘Ah, well, my lass, you must have your own way; but I hope you won’t play fast and loose with Hugh Owen, for you’ll never get a husband at this rate. I said, when you first came home, that I’d look higher than him for you, but you’re not the girl you were then. You’ve lost more than a bit of your beauty, Nell, since you had the fever, and it’s ten to one if it will ever come back again. And now that father is so down about the farm rent being raised, and talks in that pitiful way about leaving the country, or going to the workhouse, I think you might go farther and fare worse, than Hugh Owen.’

‘Very well, mother, I’ll think about it,’ the girl would say, more to put an end to the discussion than anything else, and she would wander away from the

farm, keeping well to the back of the Hall, and ready to dart off like a hare, if she saw any chance of encountering strangers. Whilst Nell was leading this kind of hide-and-seek life, the festivities at the Hall were going on bravely. They began, as the old housekeeper had said, as soon as breakfast had concluded, and were kept up till dawn the following morning. A few hours were certainly devoted to eating, drinking and sleeping, and a few more to fishing, riding and driving; but the intervals were filled with cards, smoke and drink, till Nora opened her eyes in astonishment, and wondered if she had got into a club in mistake for a private house. Her hostess appeared quite used to that sort of thing, and entered into it with avidity. She played whist or baccarat as well as anyone there, and could sip her brandy and soda, and smoke her Turkish cigarette with the keenest enjoyment. She began to think that Lady Ilfracombe was rather slow after a day or two, and, indeed,

Nora's fastness, such as it was, looked quite a tame, uninteresting thing beside that of Lady Bowmant's. So she fell naturally to the company of the other ladies who were staying there, and her husband seemed pleased it should be so, and more than once whispered to her that the whole concern was 'a bit too warm' for him, and they would certainly 'cut it' at the end of the week. All the same, he played night after night with his hosts and their guests, and seemed to be enjoying himself with the best of them. The other lady visitors, of whom one or two bore rather a shady character (though of this fact Nora was entirely ignorant), were ready to avail themselves of all the luxuries provided for them, but that did not deter them from saying nasty things about Lady Bowmant behind her back, which struck Lady Ilfracombe as being particularly ill-bred and ungrateful.

'My dear Lady Ilfracombe,' said one of them to her, 'you know she was positively *nobody* — a grocer's daughter, I

believe, or something equally horrible ; and this old fool, Sir Archibald, was smitten by her red cheeks and ringlets, and married her six months after his first wife's death. She is just the sort of person to take an old dotard's fancy. Don't you agree with me?'

'Well, I am not sure if I do, Mrs Lumley,' replied Nora. 'I think Lady Bowmant is exceedingly good-natured, and no worse in her manners than many women whom I have met who could boast of much higher birth. I know nothing of our hostess's ancestry, so I can only speak of her as I find her.'

'That is not saying much!' exclaimed the other, laughing. 'To see her go on with that poor Prince of Huhm-Hessetal is enough to make one die of laughing. With his broken English, and her attempts at French, it is as good as a play. And the open way in which she flatters him. He will think he is a little god before he leaves Usk.'

Their ill-nature made Nora better in-

clined than she would otherwise have been towards the object of it, and she found that Lady Bowmant, though decidedly fast and vulgar, was so kind-hearted and frank with it all, that she could not help liking her much better than she did her detractors.

‘I know I’m an awful Goth,’ she would observe confidentially to Nora. ‘But I can’t speak a word of French, and I want this poor prince, who can hardly speak a word of English, to feel at home with us, so I “butter” him up as well as I know how. You see, Lady Ilfracombe, I wasn’t born to the purple. My father was a poor clergyman—ah, you may stare, but it is an accredited fact that clergymen’s children are always the worst—I have three brothers, the greatest scamps you ever knew. They ride like devils and they swear like jockeys; and, if you put them into a drawing-room, they don’t know what on earth to do with their arms and legs, but not one of them would tell a lie or do a dishonourable action to save his

life. No more would I. I am quite aware that I'm not fit to be a baronet's wife, but my old man chose me, and so I do the best I can. And between you and me and the post,' continued Lady Bowmant, laughing, 'I think, considering how I was brought up, that I manage very well. The people down at our place thought I should eat peas with my knife, or something pretty of that sort, the first time I went out to a decent dinner, but I didn't, and here I am, you see, with a real prince for my guest, to say nothing of you and Lord Ilfracombe. Oh, I'm afraid to tell you how much I admire your husband, for fear that you should think I want to "mash" him; but he really is *too* handsome for anything. I do so love fair men. I told Sir Archibald yesterday, that if the earl had not been married, I couldn't have resisted a flirtation with him.'

'Have one now,' cried Nora merrily. 'Don't mind me. It is quite the fashion for married men to flirt now-a-days; and

a lady in town told me once that she should feel quite hurt if the women did not consider her husband worth pulling caps for.'

'Now, you're just the sort of girl I like,' said Lady Bowmant admiringly. 'I suppose it isn't good manners to call you a "girl," just as if you were nobody. Still you are younger than I am, so you must forgive me. You love horses, too. I can see you're regularly plucky by the way you handled my little mare yesterday, and I should love to make you as good a whip as myself. I may say *that*, you know, for my brothers and I rode and drove from little children, and it is the only thing I can do well.'

'Except play cards and smoke cigarettes,' put in Nora slyly.'

'Oh, you think that all very dreadful; I can hear it from the tone of your voice,' replied her good-humoured hostess. 'But my old man doesn't mind it, and he's the principal person to please, isn't

he? I don't know what he would do at Usk, dear old chap! if I couldn't take a hand at whist now and then. I have my horses, you see, but he is getting a bit too puffy for horse exercise, so he would be dreadfully dull without his little game in the evening—oh, yes, I know what you are going to say, Lady Ilfracombe—and in the mornings, too. Well, I know it is dreadfully dissipated, but it has grown into a sort of habit with us, till we cannot do anything else. But will you come round the village for a spin with me in my tandem? I can show you some beautiful country, as well as some beautiful cobs. Sir Archibald has made it the fashion to deride my tandem, because once a stupid little child ran right under the leader's feet and got a few scratches; but you must not believe all he says. Beau and Belle are two little beauties and I am sure you will not be afraid to sit behind them.'

'I am quite sure also,' replied Nora,

and she went at once to get herself ready for the drive.

‘You mustn’t be surprised to see we are going alone,’ said Lady Bowmant, as they met again in the hall. ‘I never take a groom with me unless I intend calling anywhere. They are no earthly use, stuck up behind, listening to every word you say and retailing it in the servants’ hall. Besides, I never knew a man do anything for me that I wasn’t quite as well able to do for myself. So we’ll have no back seat, if it’s all the same to you.’

‘Pray don’t alter any of your accustomed rules for my sake,’ replied the countess, as they emerged into the open together.

The dappled-cream cobs were a picture, with their hogged manes and close-docked tails. They were as perfectly matched in appearance as two horses could possibly be; but their tempers were the very opposite of one another. Beau was a darling, or, rather let us say

he would have been, if Belle would have let him alone to do his business by himself. He occupied the shafts, and stood like a rock, with his forefeet well planted and his neck curved, and his eyes looking neither to the right hand nor the left. But Belle, like most of her sex, could not leave a man in peace, and thought it a bad compliment to herself if he kept steady. So she tossed her pretty head and neck incessantly, and threw the foam from her bit, in her impatience to be off. Lady Bowmant, who was nothing if she was not a whip, mounted to her seat and gathered up the 'ribbons' in the most artistic manner, whilst Nora placed herself beside her.

'Let go!' shouted her ladyship, and off they set, Belle curveting down the drive as if she were dancing, whilst good little Beau threw all his soul into his work, and pulled the dog-cart gallantly along.

'Come, that won't do,' cried Lady Bowmant, as she touched up Belle and

made her do her share; 'you're not going to leave all the hard work to Beau, miss, not if I know it. Pull up, like a good girl, and leave off fooling. 'Aren't they a pair of darlings?' she continued, addressing Nora. 'I value them above everything, because they were one of my dear old man's wedding presents to me; but they are distinctly precious in themselves. Here we are at the commencement of Usk, and now you'll see some fun, Lady Ilfracombe. See how all the people—boys and girls, men and women—fly before me, tumbling over each other to get out of my way. I might be King Herod coming to massacre the innocents, by the manner they scuttle out of the road. Whoa, my beauty; there, go gently, gently, Belle. For heaven's sake, don't kick up any of your shines here, or they'll call the policemen. Have you heard that I have twice been stopped and once fined for furious driving, Lady Ilfracombe?'

‘No, indeed, I haven’t,’ replied Nora, who was enjoying the fun immensely.

On they flew through the village and out on the open road, the cobs having now settled seriously to their work, and skimming over the ground like a pair of swallows.

When they had driven half the way into Newport, Lady Bowmant turned their heads homewards, and trotted them gently up a long hill. She had them so completely under her control, that it was a pleasure to see her handle the reins and guide them with a flick of her whip.

‘I’d give anything to drive as you do,’ said Lady Ilfracombe, with genuine admiration of the prowess of her companion. ‘I should not be afraid whatever happened whilst you had the reins.’

Lady Bowmant looked pleased, but she answered lightly,—

‘Dear me, it is nothing, only practice. I bet you could manage them quite as well as I do if you tried. They are thoroughly well trained, you see, and

that's half the battle; and they are thoroughbred into the bargain. You can do twice as much with a well-bred horse as you can with an outsider. Their mouths are like velvet. You could guide them with a bit of string; and as for their jumping about a little, that's only their fun, you know; there's no vice in it; in fact, there's not a grain of vice between the two of them. I don't know what I should do without the darlings. They are the very joy of my life.'

At this juncture they came across a cottage, which seemed to recall something to Lady Bowmant's mind.

'By the way,' she exclaimed suddenly, 'I wonder how Phil Farley is, or if the poor old man is still alive. He used to be a *protégé* of mine last summer, and I often visited him; but I have quite forgotten to ask after him since my return. Would you mind my jumping down for a minute, Lady Ilfracombe? I *should* like just to inquire how the old man is.'

‘Of course not,’ said her companion cordially.

‘You will hold the reins for me? You will not be afraid of them?’

‘Not in the least,’ cried Nora, as she took the ribbons from Lady Bowmant’s hands. ‘Don’t hurry yourself on my account. I shall not mind waiting for you at all.’

‘Thank you so much,’ replied her hostess, as, after having stroked the necks of her horses, and kissed their noses, she disappeared into the cottage.

Nora was rather pleased to be left in sole charge. She had been longing to have a turn at the cobs herself. She had been watching Lady Bowmant’s actions very closely, and noticed with what ease she guided the little horses—how quickly they obeyed her voice and the touch of her hand; and had been wishing all the time to try driving them. She had never handled a tandem in her life before, but she was a plucky girl, and her very ignorance made her bold. So, as soon as

Lady Bowmant had disappeared under the low roof of the cottage, she gathered up the reins, and gave the leader a slight flick with her whip. Belle felt the difference of the hands at once; she was not used to that sort of thing. The lash of the whip had fallen on her hind quarters, and she threw out her heels at once, and struck her stable companion, Beau, full in the face. Beau resented the action; he felt he hadn't deserved it of Belle, the best part of whose work he had taken on himself all the morning; so he swerved a little aside, and then broke into a smart trot, which the coquettish Belle soon persuaded him to change into a canter, and in another moment, before their driver knew what they were after, the pair were tearing off in the direction of their stables as fast as ever they could lay their feet to the ground. Nora tugged and tugged at the reins without producing the slightest effect on them. She was very inexperienced, but she could not help seeing that the cobs

were running away, and altogether beyond her control. She grew very pale; but she held on to the reins like grim death, and just managed to steer them clear of a donkey - cart which they seemed disposed to take in their stride. She began already to wonder what she should do when they came to the drive gates of Usk Hall, which curved sharply round to the left. They would assuredly bolt through them, she thought, and upset the dog-cart, in all probability, against the postern of the gate. Perhaps they would kill her from the collision and the fall. The thought that flashed through her mind at that juncture was, How would Ilfracombe take the news of her death?—what would he do without her?’

‘I’m afraid I’m in for it,’ she said to herself. ‘It’s all up a tree with me. I’m bound for kingdom come, as sure as a gun.’

Even at that moment of danger Nora could not be sentimental, though she felt the force of the situation perhaps as

much as if she had been praying to heaven to avert her doom. On flew the cobs through the village, though fortunately without running over anybody, and down a narrow lane, on the way to the Hall. There was a sharp curve about the middle of it. As Nora reached the point, someone—a woman—suddenly rose from the bank which skirted the road, and stood full in the way of the flying steeds, catching with her hand at the reins of Belle as she passed. Nora thought the horses were stopped, but the next moment they started off again; but the woman was not to be seen—she had fallen.

‘My God,’ thought Nora, ‘I have killed somebody. They have run over her.’

The arrest, however, slight as it was, had had its effect. Belle and Beau suddenly stood still as rocks, and Nora leapt at once from the cart and approached the stranger, who was just scrambling to her feet.

‘Oh, how good, how brave of you!’

she cried. 'If you had not done that, they might have dashed the cart and me to pieces against the gate. But have you hurt yourself? Are you sure you are all right?'

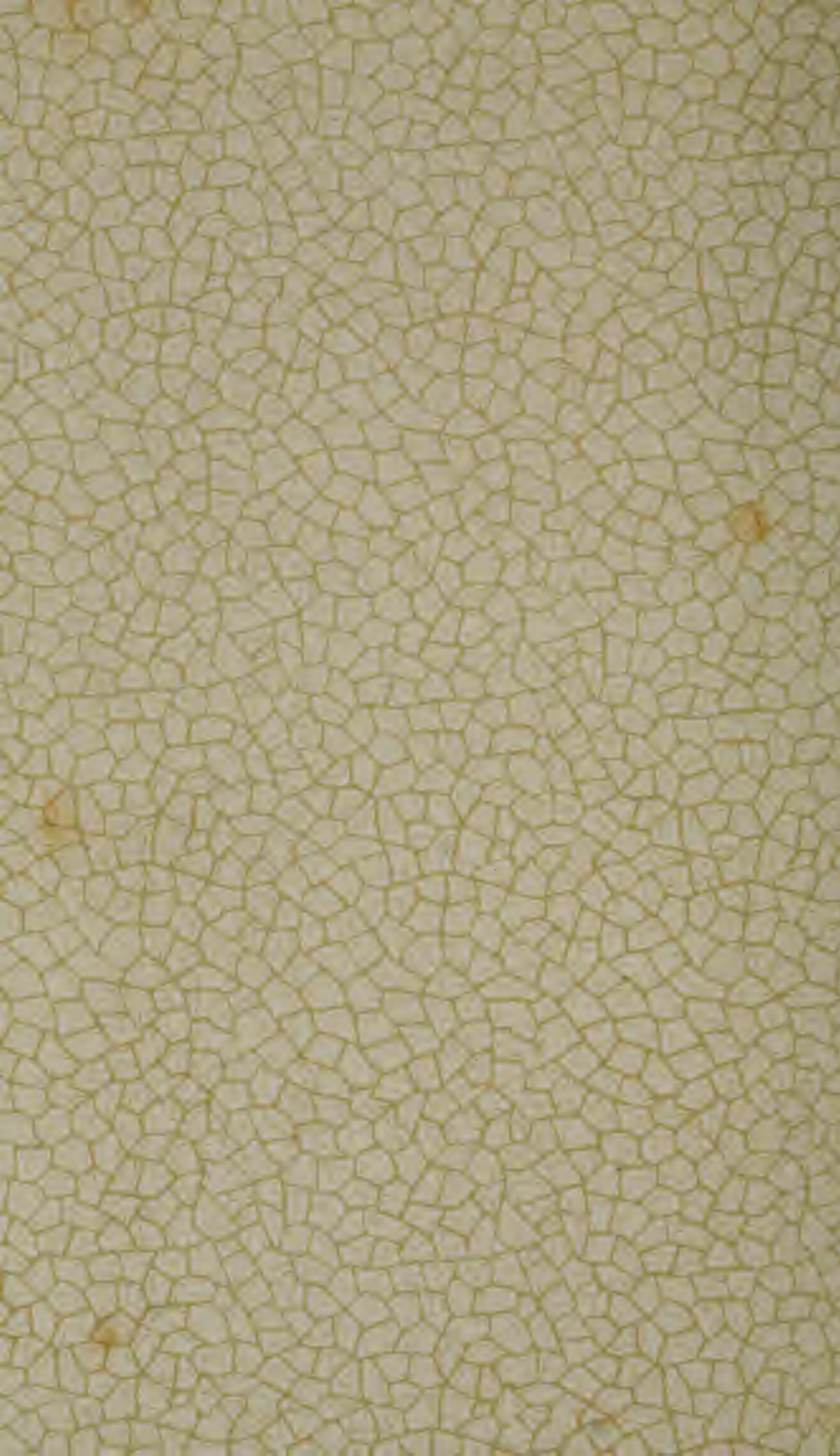
'I think I am,' replied the young woman, as she rose to her feet. They only knocked me down; the wheels did not come near me.'

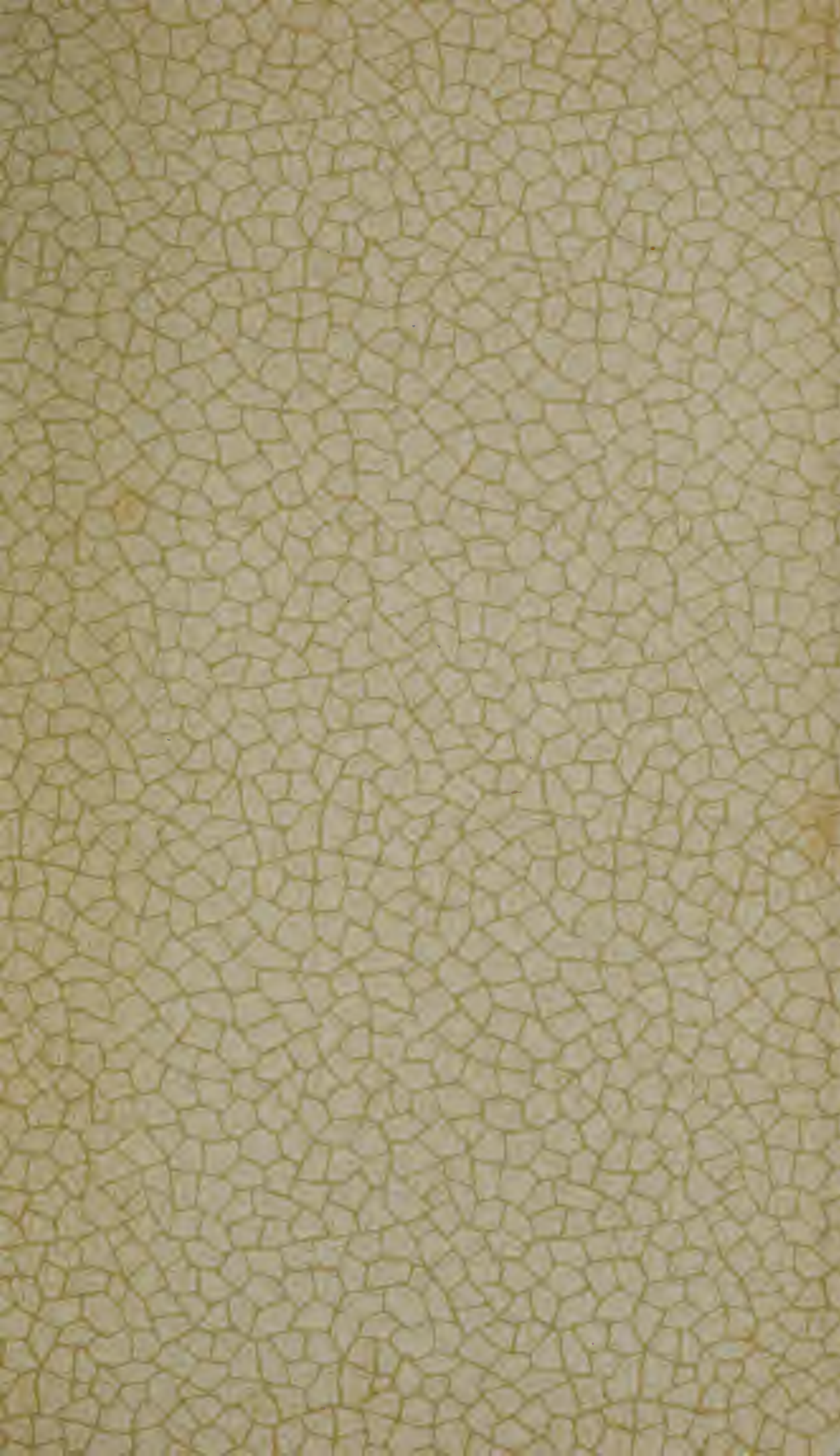
'Thank God for that!' cried Nora earnestly. 'I should never have forgiven myself if you had been hurt.'

She gazed at the face of the country girl in amazement, for she thought it was the most beautiful she had ever seen. And so it was they first met—Nell and Nora.

END OF VOL. II.







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